

# After the New Testament: *The Writings of Apostolic Fathers*

Prof. Bart D. Ehrman



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# **After the New Testament: The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers**

## **Part I**

### **Professor Bart D. Ehrman**



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Bart Ehrman is the James A. Gray Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. With degrees from Wheaton College (B.A.) and Princeton Theological Seminary (M.Div. and Ph.D., magna cum laude), he taught at Rutgers for four years before moving to UNC in 1988. During his tenure at UNC, he has garnered numerous awards and prizes, including the Students' Undergraduate Teaching Award (1993), the Ruth and Philip Hettleman Prize for Artistic and Scholarly Achievement (1994), the Bowman and Gordon Gray Award for Excellence in Teaching (1998), and the James A. Gray Chair in Biblical Studies (2003).

With a focus on early Christianity in its Greco-Roman environment and a special expertise in the textual criticism of the New Testament, Professor Ehrman has published dozens of book reviews and more than 20 scholarly articles for academic journals. He has authored or edited 16 books, including *The Monk and the Messiah: The Story of How the New Testament Came to be Changed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005); *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford University Press, 1999); *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford, 1997; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2004); and *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford, 1993). He is currently at work on a new commentary on several non-canonical Gospels for the *Hermeneia Commentary* series, published by Fortress Press.

Professor Ehrman is a popular lecturer, giving numerous talks each year for such groups as the Carolina Speakers Bureau, the UNC Program for the Humanities, the Biblical Archaeology Society, and select universities across the nation. He has served as the president of the Society of Biblical Literature, Southeast Region; book review editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*; editor of the Scholar's Press Monograph Series *The New Testament in the Greek Fathers*; and co-editor of the E. J. Brill series *New Testament Tools and Studies*. Among his administrative responsibilities, he has served on the executive committee of the Southeast Council for the Study of Religion and has chaired the New Testament textual criticism section of the Society of Biblical Religion, as well as serving as Director of Graduate Studies and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UNC.

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# **After the New Testament: The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers**

## **Scope:**

At the very foundation of the Christian religion stand the writings of the New Testament, a collection of 27 books that represent the earliest surviving literary productions of the burgeoning Church and that eventually came to be regarded as sacred Scripture. The writings produced by Christians *after* the New Testament are also important, however, as they can reveal to us how Christianity changed, developed, and grew after the first Christian century had passed.

The writings of the Apostolic Fathers are the most important books for understanding these developments in Christianity immediately after the New Testament period. The term *Apostolic Father* was coined by scholars who believed that the authors of these books were companions or followers of the apostles of Jesus. Scholars today do not accept this older view, because the books in the collection appear to have been written in a later generation. But most of them do date from the early to mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century, and as such, they are among the earliest Christian writings from outside the New Testament.

There are 10 (or 11) authors who are traditionally included in the collection of the Apostolic Fathers. Some of the works are by well-known figures of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century (such as Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna); others are anonymous. Together, they represent the early writings of *proto-orthodoxy*—that is, they represent the views that eventually came to influence and inform the shape of Christianity as it was to grow into a world religion that eventually converted the Roman Empire and became the major religious (and political, social, cultural, and economic) force of the Middle Ages.

In this course, we will examine the various writings of the Apostolic Fathers, both to see what each of the surviving books has to say and to see how these books can instruct us about the emerging Christian Church of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

In rough outline, the lectures of the course are set up in “pairs,” in which the first lecture discusses the writing of one of the Apostolic Fathers and the next deals with the broader implications of the writing for understanding key issues in the early history of Christianity. We will begin with the letter of 1 Clement, written by the Christians of Rome to quell an uprising in the church of Corinth around A.D. 95; our examination of this letter will lead us, in the next lecture, to consider the development of a Church hierarchy in the early Christian communities.

Next, we will consider the Letters of Ignatius, one of the earliest Christian martyrs, whose writings urge adherence to the one bishop of each church and warn against false teachers. These letters will serve as a springboard to consider various kinds of “heresies” in early Christianity. Then, we will look at the letter written by Polycarp to the church in Philippi, which had experienced some

turmoil when one of its elders was caught red-handed in some kind of shady dealings; this letter quotes numerous earlier Christian writings and, thus, will allow us, in the next lecture, to consider how Christians began to appreciate earlier writings as canonical Scripture.

Another writing of the Apostolic Fathers is an account of Polycarp's own martyrdom; this eyewitness report will lead us to consider how, why, when, and where Christians were persecuted for their faith in the early years of the religion. Also significant among these writings is a book called the Didache, which contains ethical instructions for Christians and indicates how the Christian rites of baptism, eucharist, prayer, and fasting were to be practiced; this work will lead us then to consider the emergence of distinctively Christian rituals in the Church.

Next, we will turn to the so-called Letter of Barnabas, which was written to show the superiority of Christianity to Judaism. This letter will allow us to explore the nature of early Jewish-Christian relations and the rise of Christian anti-Semitism. From there, we will move to a study of a book (mis-)named 2 Clement, which in fact, is the earliest surviving Christian sermon from outside the New Testament. Because 2 Clement uses an allegorical approach to interpreting Scripture, it will enable us to consider more fully, in the next lecture, the various methods of interpretation used by early Christians in understanding their sacred texts.

This matter of interpretation is equally important for the next author we examine, Papias, whose works have come down to us only in fragments. Papias tells us that he prefers oral traditions to written texts in trying to understand what happened during the life of Jesus. This will bring us, in the next lecture, to a consideration of the importance of the oral transmission of early Christian tradition.

Next, we will turn to one of the earliest surviving apocalyptic writings of Christianity, The Shepherd of Hermas, which will, in turn, lead us to consider the importance of apocalyptic thought for the earliest followers of Jesus. As Christians moved away from an apocalyptic worldview, they began to have increased interactions with outsiders who were suspicious of their religion. The next writing we will consider is the anonymous Letter to Diognetus, which will serve as a springboard for considering the early *apologetic* movement, in which Christians defended themselves against charges of atheism and immorality and argued that their religion was, in fact, the only true one.

We will conclude our course by seeing how the Apostolic Fathers can instruct us concerning the development of Christianity in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, in the years between the foundation of the Church by Jesus and his disciples and the emergence of the Catholic Church of later times.

# Lecture One

## Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers

**Scope:** Everyone knows about the New Testament, but few people are aware of the writings produced by Christians soon after the books of the New Testament were written. Probably the most important collection of such books is called the *Apostolic Fathers*. This group comprises 10 (or 11) authors who were, for the most part, living and writing in the decades after the books of the New Testament were produced; their writings still survive for us today and give us important insights into how Christianity was developing in its earliest stages, as it moved away from its inauspicious beginnings toward becoming a major world religion.

In this introductory lecture, we will learn some basic information about the Apostolic Fathers: which authors are included, what their writings were about, how they came to be collected into a corpus of literature in modern times, and what they can tell us about the developments of Christian thought and practice soon after New Testament times.

### Outline

- I. There is no doubt that the New Testament is the most important book in the history of Western civilization in general, but for the Christian religion in particular.
  - A. These 27 books provide us with our information about the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus; about the lives and ministries of his early followers; and about the ethics and doctrines emerging from the early Christian Church.
  - B. But it would be a mistake to think that Christianity as we know it emerged directly from the pages of the New Testament itself.
    - 1. Numerous doctrines that are familiar to Christians today are not explicitly found in the New Testament, such as the doctrine of the Trinity.
    - 2. The New Testament does not discuss modern understandings of baptism.
    - 3. The Church structures that we are familiar with—whether from the Roman Catholic Church or the Southern Baptist—are not explicitly taught in Scripture.
    - 4. The ethical stands that form such a central part of Christian life today cannot be found explicitly in Scripture: There is no specific reference, for example, to the problems of abortion or premarital sex.

5. Where did Christianity come from, then, if not directly from the Bible? The answer is the same for all modern Christian denominations: Christianity developed into what it became after the New Testament period, down through history, until we ended up with all the varieties of Christianity we have in the world today.
  6. If we want to understand Christianity—the most important social, cultural, economic, political, and religious force of Western civilization—we have to understand how it developed *after* the New Testament was written.
- II. This course will be about how Christianity developed immediately after the New Testament period, as evidenced in a group of writings known as the *Apostolic Fathers*.
- A. The title of this collection does *not* signify that the writings it contains were written by apostles of Jesus.
    1. The apostles were the first-generation missionaries of Jesus, many of them his own disciples.
    2. The Apostolic Fathers represent a group of authors who were thought to have been followers of or companions with these first-generation apostles.
    3. The term *Apostolic Fathers* was coined in modern times to denote a collection of writings by the followers of the followers of Jesus.
    4. As we will see, if this literal meaning of *Apostolic Fathers* is what the term is taken to signify, then this collection of writings is not aptly named: There is little reason to think that the authors of these books were personal companions of the apostles.
    5. These books do, however, appear to represent later views that stood in some continuity with those of the apostles.
    6. They also represent views that were later to be taken as standing in continuity with the understandings of Christianity that emerged as dominant in later centuries. To that extent, the 10 or 11 authors of the books we call the Apostolic Fathers can all be taken to be early representatives of proto-orthodoxy.
  - B. The term *proto-orthodoxy* will be an important one in our study of the Apostolic Fathers.
    1. From the earliest of times, Christianity was widely diverse.
    2. It is still diverse today, of course, as can be seen in the wide range of denominations, each of which thinks that its views are “right.”
    3. Even greater diversity existed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Christian centuries, where the varieties of “Christianity” were mind-boggling.
    4. One group emerged victorious from this morass. This group declared itself orthodox. Its forerunners we can call *proto-orthodox*.
    5. The writings of the Apostolic Fathers are the earliest group of proto-orthodox writings that we have.

**III.** A wide range of literature is represented in this collection of writings. An overview of this range can give us a sense of the kinds of issues we will be addressing in this course.

- A. Some of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers were letters.
  - 1. The earliest writing of the collection, 1 Clement, is a letter written by the church of Rome to the church of Corinth, to deal with a problem that had arisen there, when the leaders of the church had been ousted by a group of newcomers.
  - 2. Another letter was allegedly written by a traveling companion of the apostle Paul, Barnabas; this letter is designed to show the superiority of Christianity to Judaism and is filled with anti-Jewish invective.
  - 3. The Letters of Ignatius, one of the early Christian martyrs, are among the best known. These letters, written to several churches while Ignatius was en route to martyrdom, insist that Christians adhere to the authority of their bishop and avoid all false teaching.
  - 4. One of the letters Ignatius wrote was to the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, who wrote a letter of his own, to the church of Philippi, dealing with problems that had arisen there.
- B. One of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers is an account of the arrest, trial, and execution of Polycarp, some years after he wrote his Letter to the Philippians.
- C. Another writing is a kind of “Church manual,” the so-called Didache, which gives instructions to members of the Church about how to live ethical lives and how to conduct their liturgical practices, such as baptism and eucharist.
- D. Another writing, misnamed 2 Clement, is an actual sermon delivered by an anonymous author, in which he urges his hearers to be grateful for and faithful to the salvation they have received in Christ.
- E. Another writing, that we have only in fragments, is the work of a shadowy figure from early Christianity named Papias, whose commentary on Scripture provides us with some apocryphal stories about Jesus and his followers.
- F. Another writing is an *apocalypse*—that is, a revelation from God about the present state of affairs and about what is yet to be; this is the longest book of the Apostolic Fathers, The Shepherd of Hermas, so named because the interpreter of the book’s visions comes to the author in the guise of a shepherd.
- G. Finally, there is an *apology* among these writings, the Letter to Diognetus, which strives to defend Christianity against the charges leveled against it by its cultured despisers.

- IV.** This collection of literature is so diverse that one wonders whether it makes sense to think of it as a “body” of literature at all.
- A. It is made up of different genres, written by different authors, at different times, for different purposes.
  - B. On the other hand, the same could also be said about the canon of the New Testament.
  - C. It is best, then, to see the Apostolic Fathers as a modern collection of ancient writings that, together, can tell us about emerging proto-orthodoxy: its beliefs, ethics, Church structures, liturgical practices, and sacred authorities.

**Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “Introduction,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 1–16.  
Clayton N. Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp. 1–10.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, pp. 1–6.  
W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, pp. 119–160.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Think of several ways that the form of Christianity you are most familiar with differs from other kinds of Christianity in the modern world and reflect on why such differences may have emerged if every kind of Christianity is ultimately rooted in the same Scriptures (the New Testament).
2. In your judgment, how important is it to know how Christianity developed in the years after the New Testament was written? Why? (Or why not?)

## Lecture Two

### The Letter of 1 Clement

**Scope:** We begin our exploration of the Apostolic Fathers by examining the oldest book of the collection, 1 Clement. The book is named after its reputed author, Clement, allegedly a bishop of the city of Rome. The book itself does not claim Clement as its author, however, but is anonymous. In any event, the purpose of the letter is clear. It is written by the Christian church of Rome to the church in Corinth in order to deal with a major problem that had erupted in that community.

There had been a power struggle in the Corinthian church, in which the “elders” in charge of the church had been displaced by others who wanted their positions of authority. The Christians of Rome found this to be an untenable situation and wrote a long letter arguing that the elders must be restored to their rightful place, basing their argument on a long string of examples from the Scriptures (the Old Testament), which oppose those who seek their own advancement out of envy for others.

### Outline

- I.** Probably the first of the Apostolic Fathers to be written was 1 Clement.
  - A.** The title of the book is probably a misnomer.
    - 1. Tradition indicated that it was originally penned by Clement, an alleged companion of Paul (Philippians 4:3) who was thought to have been the bishop of the church of Rome after the apostle Peter himself.
    - 2. There are reasons to doubt this tradition, however—in particular, because the book doesn’t name Clement as its author and, in fact, never mentions his name.
    - 3. The book is written by the church in Rome to the church in Corinth.
  - B.** For reasons we will see at the end of the lecture, it appears that the book was written before the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century—that is, before even some of the books of the New Testament were produced.
- II.** Christian scholars knew of the existence of this book down through the centuries.
  - A.** It is referred to by such early Christian writers as Dionysius and Clement of Alexandria.
  - B.** But the book itself was lost until it turned up in a manuscript in 1627.

- C. This manuscript was in the possession of the patriarch of Constantinople, Cyril Lucar, who offered it as a present to King James I of England.
  - 1. It wasn't until James died, however, that Western scholars got hold of the manuscript.
  - 2. It was a manuscript of the New Testament from about the 5<sup>th</sup> century—one of the oldest then in existence.
  - 3. But it also contained the texts of 1 and 2 Clement, which were first published in 1633.

**III.** 1 Clement is an interesting and important book for understanding the history of Christianity in its early period.

- A. The occasion of the letter is clear: There had been a rift in the church in Corinth, in which its group of ruling elders had been removed from their positions of authority in a kind of ecclesiastical coup (see chs. 1, 44).
- B. The Christians in Rome found this situation untenable, and they wrote this long letter in response, attempting to move the Corinthians to restore the ousted elders to their rightful place as rulers of the church.

**IV.** The writer(s) of the letter go to great lengths to show that it was wrong for the leaders to be replaced by others.

- A. One of their persistent arguments is that the Old Testament shows that human jealousy always leads to harmful actions that are opposed to God—from the very beginning, with the conflict between Cain and Abel (ch. 4).
- B. Even more recent examples reveal what happens when jealousy and envy are given free reign, as evident in the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul in a previous generation.
- C. God desires his people to be faithful to their calling, as seen in such Old Testament examples as Abraham and Rahab.
- D. According to the authors of this account, God is not a God of chaos but of order; therefore, the orderly succession of leaders is what God wants, not ecclesiastical infighting.
  - 1. God's desire for orderliness can be seen from nature itself (the orderly nature of the seasons, of day following night, and so on; cf. ch. 20).
  - 2. Similarly, it can be seen in such supernatural events as the regular rebirth of the phoenix at precisely 500-year intervals (ch. 25).
- E. Moreover, God set up an orderly way of transferring power in the churches from one generation to the next, in what we might call the *apostolic succession* (ch. 42). Anyone who breaks this orderly arrangement is obviously standing in opposition to God.

- V. The book of 1 Clement presents several interesting historical issues for anyone interested in the early history of Christianity.
- A. It shows at least one group that revered the Old Testament Scriptures as authoritative for understanding the ways and will of God (as opposed to other Christian groups who rejected the authority of the Old Testament).
  - B. And it shows that the church of Rome was willing to flex its muscles in asserting its authority over churches in other cities—a harbinger of things to come as the Church throughout the Western world became the *Roman Catholic Church*.
- VI. This leads to the question of when the book was actually written.
- A. On the one hand, the book could not have been written very much after the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century: It refers to the deaths of Peter and Paul as being “in our generation” (c. A.D. 64) and knows of leaders of some churches who had been appointed by the apostles themselves (chs. 42, 44).
  - B. On the other hand, it could not have been written long before the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, because it calls the Corinthian church “ancient” (ch. 47) and speaks of some church members as having been Christians “from youth to old age” (and surely they were not just in their 40s!).
  - C. The best guesstimate, then, is that the book was written near the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, possibly around A.D. 95.
- VII. It is striking that in some parts of the Church (Corinth itself, for example, and Alexandria), the book was actually given canonical status as one of the books of the New Testament.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “The First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 18–151.

Clayton Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp. 98–116.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

Barbara Bowe, *A Church in Crisis: Ecclesiology and Paraenesis in Clement of Rome*.

James Jeffers, *Conflict in Rome: Social Order and Hierarchy in Early Christianity*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Do you know of situations today where religious communities have “split” over the question of authority (and over who should be in charge)? If so, what kinds of issues were involved? Could similar issues have been at work in the “coup at Corinth” referred to in 1 Clement?

2. Does the notion of *apostolic succession*—that is, the idea that the present-day leaders of the Church can trace their spiritual lineage back through the ages to Christ himself—continue to play a role in the Christian Church today?

## Lecture Three

# Church Structures in Early Christianity

**Scope:** The previous lecture on 1 Clement opens the door to an investigation of the structures that were developing in the early Christian Church soon after the New Testament period. The community to which the letter was addressed, Corinth, is known to us from the pages of the New Testament itself, because it is the recipient of two letters from the apostle Paul (1 and 2 Corinthians) in an earlier generation. What is striking is that the Church structure/hierarchy had obviously changed between the time of Paul in the 50s A.D. to the time of 1 Clement in 95 A.D.

When Paul wrote the Corinthians, they did not have a board of elders who ran the affairs of the church. By the time of 1 Clement, a hierarchy was clearly in place, with officers of the church who made decisions and performed official functions. In 1 Clement, then, we can see a movement toward a Church hierarchy, which will eventuate in the structures that developed in the Middle Ages, where there are priests in charge of churches, bishops in charge of priests, and ultimately, a pope in charge of the bishops.

### Outline

- I. In the previous lecture, we began to study the Apostolic Fathers by exploring the writing of 1 Clement.
  - A. The overarching issue of the letter involved an ecclesiastical rift in the church of Corinth, because the elders of the church had been displaced by others who assumed their positions of authority.
  - B. The church of Rome responded to this situation by insisting that the elders be returned to their offices.
  - C. The issues raised by 1 Clement can lead us to explore broader issues involving Church authority in early Christianity: How were the early churches organized and structured? Who made the decisions? On what grounds did the church leaders exercise their authority?
  - D. These are key questions because, as we will see, the idea of Church structure *developed* over time within the Christian communities, leading to the kind of official hierarchy that we are familiar with as having been in place throughout the Middle Ages down to today.
  - E. Originally, however, the idea of an ecclesiastical hierarchy was foreign to the notion of the Christian Church.

- F. This can be seen by tracing the history of the church in Corinth—the recipient of 1 Clement—in earlier times, through the writings of the apostle Paul in the preceding generation.
- II. The New Testament books of 1 and 2 Corinthians are among our most significant documents of early Christianity for understanding the nature of the Church in its earliest times.
  - A. Both letters are written by Paul to the church that he founded in Corinth; they date, probably, to the 50s—about a full generation before 1 Clement.
  - B. In particular, 1 Corinthians deals with a large number of problems that had erupted in the church.
    - 1. There were divisions and sects within the community.
    - 2. There were instances of personal enmity, with some members taking others to court.
    - 3. There were ethical problems, such as Christian men visiting prostitutes and one church member sleeping with his stepmother.
    - 4. There were moral dilemmas, such as whether to eat meat offered to idols and whether it was appropriate for married couples to have normal sexual relations.
    - 5. There were problems with the worship services themselves: a lack of sharing in the communal meals and spiritual chaos during the services of worship.
    - 6. There were theological problems: Some members denied the reality of the future resurrection.
  - C. Paul deals with these problems one by one, but it is clear that the overarching problem is a faulty understanding of the nature of the human body and the body of Christ, as seen in the miscomprehension of the nature of the resurrection.
  - D. But what is most striking for our purposes is that Paul does not deal with either this overarching problem or its individual manifestations by appealing to the leaders of the church to straighten out the situation.
    - 1. This is because there *were* no leaders of the church!
    - 2. The church in Corinth, like Paul's other churches, was organized as a *charismatic* community, in which the Spirit, not individual humans, was in charge of the life of the community.
    - 3. What happens, though, when every person has an equal share in the Spirit and an equal manifestation of the Spirit in a spiritual gift? A good deal of chaos!
- III. Within a generation, by the time of 1 Clement, we see an entirely different kind of church structure. Now there is a board of elders (*presbyters*) who are given authority of oversight of the church.
  - A. It was understood that these leaders had ultimate authority over what happened in the church.

- B. This authority was rooted in a notion of apostolic succession (ch. 42).
- IV. A similar kind of church structure can be seen in the *deutero-Pauline* epistles of the New Testament—that is, books written in Paul’s name after his death by one of his followers.
- A. The *pastoral* epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are particularly important for seeing this development.
  - B. Written by a Pauline Christian around the time of 1 Clement, they also presuppose a situation of church offices, with “overseers and deacons” in charge of various aspects of church life.
- V. Eventually within the churches, the board of elders and deacons would have a leader who was ultimately in charge, a bishop with the final say over all church matters.
- A. This is the situation presupposed some 15 or 20 years later in the writings of Ignatius, another one of the Apostolic Fathers.
  - B. Ignatius insisted that the churches be subservient to the bishop as to God himself.
  - C. As time went on and the churches began to be more closely tied together, the bishop over the larger churches had authority over the churches in his region.
- VI. Eventually the largest churches—Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome, for example—were considered the major *sees* of Christianity.
- A. This situation eventuated in one church having authority over all others, as the church of Rome became the center of all Christendom, with the bishop of Rome having authority over all the Church; eventually, he was to be named the *pope*.
  - B. It may be no accident that the first we learn of one church trying to assert its authority over the internal affairs of another is in a letter written precisely by the church of Rome: the book of 1 Clement.
- VII. In sum, the kind of Church hierarchy ensconced in the Middle Ages, with priests in charge of the churches, bishops in charge of the priests, and the pope in charge of the bishops, is a hierarchy that slowly developed, out of an originally quite different understanding of the Church and the role of authority within it, as seen in the earlier writings of the New Testament.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, pp. 317–342.

Bart D. Ehrman and Andrew Jacobs, eds., *Christianity in Late Antiquity, 300–450 C.E.: A Reader*, pp. 129–154.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

James Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities*.

Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Early Church*.

Harry Maier, *The Social Setting of the Ministry as Reflected in the Writings of Hermas, Clement, and Ignatius*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. If you have any connection with the Christian Church—either through personally belonging to a church or knowing others who do—what is the church structure you are most familiar with? How would you say it relates to the church structure evident in the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians?
2. What do you imagine are the benefits and downsides to having a completely democratic or charismatic structure to a religious body, where (as in 1 Corinthians) everyone has an equal say in how things are to be run?

## Lecture Four

### The Letters of Ignatius

**Scope:** The next Apostolic Father we consider is Ignatius, the early-2<sup>nd</sup>-century bishop of Antioch. Ignatius is, by all accounts, one of the most interesting early Christians we know about. Arrested for Christian activities, he was condemned to face the wild beasts in the arena in Rome; en route to his martyrdom, he wrote seven letters to churches that had sent along supporters to meet him during his journey. We still have these letters, and they make for the most interesting reading: Here are the final words of a Christian who is anticipating his own death, but who displays deep concerns for the churches he will leave behind.

Among his concerns are that the Christians of the churches remain unified behind their leaders, the bishops, and that they not accept any “false teachers” who have appeared in their midst. One letter of Ignatius is of particular interest: He writes to the Christians of Rome, his ultimate destination, and speaks to them of his coming martyrdom, urging them not to interfere with the proceedings, because he is eager to imitate Christ in experiencing a painful and bloody execution.

### Outline

- I. To this point in our course, we have considered the letter of 1 Clement and its implications for understanding the development of the Church’s official hierarchy.
- II. In this lecture and the two that follow, we turn to consider one of the most intriguing figures among the Apostolic Fathers: Ignatius of Antioch.
  - A. Ignatius was the bishop of the church of Antioch in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
    - 1. Antioch of Syria had one of the largest and most important churches in the first two centuries.
    - 2. Its sheer size may have been what led to conflicts between Christians and pagans in the city.
    - 3. We don’t have the details, but it appears that there was a citywide persecution of the Christians around A.D. 110, while Ignatius was bishop.
    - 4. He and other members of the congregation were arrested and sent to Rome to face execution.
    - 5. We will consider why they were not executed on the spot near the end of this lecture.
  - B. The reason we know about Ignatius is that he wrote several letters en route to his martyrdom in Rome.

1. He evidently was taken under armed guard on a land route from Antioch through Asia Minor. The group made a stop in the city of Smyrna, where representatives of other churches came to meet Ignatius and lend him their support.
2. He then wrote several letters to these churches—Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles. He also wrote a letter to the Christians who were awaiting his arrival in Rome.
3. He journeyed from there to the city of Troas, where he dashed off three more letters, one to the church in Philadelphia, one back to Smyrna, and one to the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, whom we will meet again in a later lecture.
4. These letters still survive and are fascinating to read. They were written in some haste by a man who knew he was soon to be thrown to the wild beasts as punishment for his Christian belief.
5. They are letters that both thank the churches for their support and address important issues facing the churches. As such, they give us insight into the concerns and problems facing Christians in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

### **III. Three major concerns dominate the Letters of Ignatius.**

- A.** First, he was concerned that there be unity in the churches.
  1. This theme is found throughout the letters, as can be seen, for example, in his Letter to the Philadelphians (7:2; 8:1).
  2. At the same time, Ignatius refers to problems in his home church, that it was not “at peace” (Philadelphians 10:1). Some have thought that in addition to persecution, there may have been internal turmoil there (cf. the Corinthian church according to 1 Clement).
  3. Is it possible that there were issues over the leadership of the church? Is it possible that Ignatius himself was part of the problem?
- B.** Ignatius believed that unity would come to the church only when it was completely submissive to its bishop.
  1. Consider several key passages: Trallians 2:2; Magnesians 3:1; Ephesians 6:1; and Smyrneans 8:1.
  2. Note that the message is quite different from the earlier letters of Paul and even the letter of 1 Clement. Here, there is a stress on the *monepiscopacy*, the role of *one* bishop leading the Church.
- C.** In particular, Ignatius was concerned about the disunifying features of “false teachers” in the midst of these congregations (Trallians 11:1). We will see the specific concerns that he has about “heresy” in the two lectures that follow.

**IV.** In many ways, the most interesting of Ignatius's letters is to the Romans.

- A. Unlike the other letters, this one was not written to a church that had sent representatives in support.
- B. It is sent, instead, to the church where Ignatius was heading.
- C. Most intriguing of all, Ignatius writes this church not to ask for help when he arrives to escape a cruel death; quite the contrary, he indicates that he wants them *not* to intervene in the proceedings, because he *wants* to suffer a violent martyrdom.
  - 1. He entreats the church not to interfere (1:2; 2:2; 4:1).
  - 2. He wants very much to die for God (4:1–2; 5:2–3).
  - 3. This is so he can be an imitator of Christ (4:2; 6:3), who also suffered a violent martyrdom.
- D. This “death wish” may seem pathological to us today, but it seemed completely natural and right for Ignatius, who saw the world as an evil place to be escaped and who saw Christ as the Son of God who was to be emulated in all things.

**V.** There are several intriguing questions about Ignatius's condemnation to face the wild beasts in Rome.

- A. First, it's not clear why he was arrested.
  - 1. Christianity was not, literally speaking, an illegal religion at the time.
  - 2. But we have evidence from the same period that some local governors sought to appease the pagan masses, who found Christians objectionable, by having them executed (cf. the governor of Bythinia/Pontus, Pliny).
- B. Second, it's not clear why Ignatius was sent to Rome instead of executed on the spot.
  - 1. It does not appear that, like the apostle Paul, he had made an appeal to Caesar to settle his case: He speaks of himself as condemned already, not charged, and he does not want to appeal; he wants to die!
  - 2. It is possible that he is being sent to Rome as a “gift” to the emperor for the violent hunting games in the arena.

**VI.** What is clear is that Ignatius's surviving letters, written under an obvious amount of stress, remain for us a stark testimony to the desire of some Christians to experience martyrdom in the early Church, as well as a clear signal of the concerns of some Christians to promote Church unity, adherence to the one bishop, and avoidance of all heretical teaching.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “The Letters of Ignatius,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 203–321.

Clayton Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp. 53–71.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Virginia Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*.

William Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Are there people today who passionately long for their own violent deaths? What would we think of people like that today? How might we think differently of Ignatius?
2. From what you know about the apostle Paul, what would you say are ways that Ignatius is both like and unlike him?

# Lecture Five

## Doctrinal Problems in the Early Church

**Scope:** Among the many interesting aspects of the Letters of Ignatius are the comments he makes on “false teachers” who have infiltrated the Christian communities that he addresses. Among the doctrinal problems that he sees in these churches is a tendency among some Christians to hold on to the ways of Judaism while trying to maintain their commitment to Christ.

In this lecture, we will examine *Judaizing* forms of Christianity in the early Church—that is, forms of Christianity that came to be labeled heretical because they insisted that in order to be fully Christian, one first had to become a Jew. Such a teaching was prominent from the earliest of times—it can be found in some of Paul’s own congregations—and may, in fact, have been the earliest form of Christian belief. But by Ignatius’s time, it was repelled as a heresy to be avoided at all costs.

### Outline

- I. We have already seen that Ignatius was a fascinating figure of early-2<sup>nd</sup>-century Christianity. One of the most notable aspects of his letters is their persistent concern for false teaching.
  - A. Traditionally, Christian false teaching has been called *heresy*, which is differentiated from *orthodoxy*.
  - B. Warnings against heresy abound in Ignatius’s letters (for example, Magnesians 8:1; Ephesians 8:1; 9:1; Trallians 11:1).
  - C. But sometimes Ignatius warns not against heresy in general but against specific kinds of false teaching.
- II. In particular, it is striking how concerned he is with Christians who continue to promote the religion of Judaism as compatible with, and even necessary to, true Christian belief.
  - A. Warnings against *Judaizing* forms of Christianity can be found especially in two of his letters.
  - B. The issue was obviously a pressing concern among the Christians of Magnesia (see Magnesians 10:3; 8:1; 9:1).
  - C. If anything, the problem was more acute among the Philadelphians (Philadelphians 6:1; 8:2).
- III. The issue of the relationship of Christianity to Judaism was not new to Ignatius’s day and did not die out soon after his death.

- A. Many of the earliest Christians maintained that because Jesus and his followers were Jewish, the religion should retain its Jewish roots.
  - 1. This was the view of the earliest followers of Jesus, according to the book of Acts.
  - 2. It appears to be the view of the author of the Gospel of Matthew (cf. Matt. 5:17–20).
  - 3. But it is a view that is strongly attacked by the apostle Paul, especially in his letter to the Galatians.(cf. Gal. 3:16).
- B. The view of Paul's opponents in Galatia lived on into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, especially among a group called the *Ebionites*.
  - 1. We aren't sure what their name originally signified.
  - 2. But from the writings of their opponents, it is relatively clear what the Ebionites believed: They maintained that a person who accepted Jesus as the (Jewish) messiah first had to become Jewish (which included the need for circumcision of men).
- C. These views were roundly attacked by proto-orthodox Christians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, including another work of the Apostolic Fathers we will consider later, the Epistle of Barnabas.

**IV.** Ignatius's own response to Judaizing Christians was similar to Paul's.

- A. The Jewish prophets predicted the coming of Christ and the religion in his name (Magnesians 8:2; 9:2; cf. Paul Romans 1:2; 3:21).
- B. Christianity is superior to Judaism (Magnesians 10:3; cf. Paul Romans 10:3).
- C. Anyone who lives as a Jew is in danger of denying God's grace (Magnesians 8:1; cf. Paul Galatians 4:2–4).
- D. The Hebrew Scriptures are all about Christ and the Christian Gospel (Philadelphians 8:2; cf. Paul Romans 3:31 ff.).

**V.** Ignatius then continues in the Pauline tradition of opposing a Judaizing form of Christianity.

- A. This is a bit of historical irony, because the earliest forms of Christianity were Jewish Christianity.
- B. This shows that *heresy* can mean not only creating something “new” that is an aberration, but it can also mean holding on to something “old” that has been deemed to have been surpassed.

**Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, pp. 330–332 (Magnesians); 339–341 (Philadelphians).

Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians in the New Testament.

## **Supplementary Reading:**

John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*.

Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*.

## **Questions to Consider:**

1. In your opinion, are Judaism and Christianity completely incompatible religions? Is it possible for someone to be both Jewish and Christian?
2. Can you think of other instances in which something that was once accepted as the “correct” understanding of things later was almost universally seen as repugnant and dangerous?

## Lecture Six

### Still Other Doctrinal Disputes

**Scope:** One other doctrinal problem that Ignatius addresses in his letters is known as *docetism*—from the Greek word *dokeo*, which means “to seem” or “to appear.” Docetic views maintained that Jesus was so fully divine that he could not actually be human; instead, he only “seemed” to be a human, with real flesh and blood.

In this lecture, we will consider the docetic views of Christ attacked by Ignatius, their antecedents in the New Testament (for example, the letter of 1 John), and some of their manifestations in the years after Ignatius (for example, among groups that scholars today label *Gnostic*).

### Outline

- I. We have already seen that the Letters of Ignatius raise the problem of heresy and orthodoxy in early Christianity.
  - A. One type of “false teaching” that Ignatius addresses involves a Judaizing form of Christianity, especially in his letters to the Magnesians and the Philadelphians.
  - B. A second type of false teaching involves an entirely different impulse, one that deals with an evolving understanding of Jesus that became quite popular in some circles of early Christianity.
  - C. This view is known to scholars as *docetism*, from the Greek word *dokeo*, which means “to seem” or “to appear.” Docetic understandings of Jesus indicated that he was not really human but only *appeared* to be.
  - D. The Docetists set up this view in direct contrast to the *adoptionist* view of the Ebionites.
    - 1. Because they were strict monotheists, the Ebionites could not accept the concept of Jesus’ divinity.
    - 2. Instead, they insisted that Jesus was a man who had been *adopted* by God.
- II. We can find the roots of docetic teachings already in the writings of the New Testament.
  - A. Most of our New Testament authors understand Jesus as completely human (for example, Matthew, Mark, and Luke).
  - B. But some writers also portray Jesus as divine.
    - 1. We see this as early as the writings of Paul (cf. Philippians 2:6–11).
    - 2. It is a clear emphasis in the Gospel of John (1:1; 10:30; 20:28).

- C. During the period of the New Testament, some Christians had apparently come to think that Jesus was so *much* divine that he could not be human.
  - 1. We see evidence of this already in the letter of 1 John.
  - 2. Evidently there were theological differences in the community that led to an actual split (1 John 2:19).
  - 3. The issue had to do with the nature of who Christ was, because some denied that he was actually a human made of flesh and blood (cf. 1 John 4:3–4).
  - 4. This explains why the author began his letter with an emphasis on Christ's real physicality (1 John 1:1–3).

**III.** Some of the opponents of Ignatius took a similar docetic line.

- A. This can be seen in his attacks on false teaching in his Letter to the Smyrneans (Smyr. 2–3).
- B. It was also evidently a problem in the church of Tralles (Trall. 9–10).

**IV.** Similar views were to live on into the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, as different believers maintained that if Jesus were fully divine, he could not also be human.

- A. The most notable teacher of such views was Marcion in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century.
  - 1. Marcion took the apostle Paul's teaching that there was a difference between the Law and the Gospel to an extreme, insisting that there were, in fact, two different Gods: the God who made this material world and the God of Jesus who came to save people from the Old Testament God.
  - 2. Jesus did not belong to the creator God's material world. He was not, therefore, born and did not actually have a human body.
- B. The proto-orthodox opposed this understanding of Christ, because if Christ did not have a human body, he could not die for human sins.

**V.** Ignatius is particularly adamant in his opposition to such views, in no small part because if the docetic view was right and Christ did not have a real body, then he did not really suffer—which would make Ignatius's imminent bloody martyrdom pointless (Smyrneans 4:2)!

**VI.** The view of Ignatius, then, appears to be that Jesus is both God and human at the same time.

- A. He speaks, for example, of the “blood of God” (Ephesians 1:1) and calls Jesus “our God.”
- B. Yet he is equally adamant that Jesus was a flesh-and-blood human being.
- C. Never does he explain how Jesus could be both things at once. But this became the standard teaching of proto-orthodox Christianity, against

*adoptionistic* Christians on the one hand (who said that Jesus was fully man but not actually divine) and docetic Christians on the other (who said that he was fully divine and not, therefore, actually human).

- D. In some respects this proto-orthodox position is best seen as a *via media*—in which the extremes of one view or another are rejected, resulting in a paradoxical understanding of Christ.
- E. It is this paradoxical understanding of Christ that ultimately led to an equally paradoxical understanding of the Trinity.

**Essential Reading:**

Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*.

J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

Richard Norris, *The Christological Controversy*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. The traditional Christian teaching about Christ is that he is fully human. Based on your experience, do Christians you know really believe that? Was Jesus a human in every way that other humans are human? Or was he, in fact, superhuman? (If he was superhuman, is that the same as being human?)
2. What kind of theological difficulties would be created by a claim that Jesus was not, in fact, really a human being?

## Lecture Seven

# The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians

**Scope:** One of the letters that Ignatius wrote was addressed not to a community but to an individual, Polycarp, the Christian bishop of the city of Smyrna in Asia Minor. We know about Polycarp from another source as well, a letter that he himself wrote to the Christians of Philippi to deal with a problem that had arisen in their community. In this lecture, we will consider Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians, highlighting the occasion for the letter and its contents.

The letter was occasioned by an unfortunate situation that had arisen among the Philippians: One of their leaders had to be disciplined because of an act of impropriety (possibly embezzlement of church funds). In order to deal with the situation, Polycarp appeals extensively to the Scriptures to argue that the love of money leads to all sorts of evil; in the end, he urges the Philippians to deal with the offending party firmly, while being open to receiving him back into the fold should he repent of the evil he had done.

### Outline

- I. One of the leaders of the early Church that we learn about from the Letters of Ignatius is the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp.
  - A. In some ways, we are better informed about Polycarp than any other figure in early-2<sup>nd</sup>-century Christianity.
  - B. Not only do we have the letter written to Polycarp by Ignatius, but we also have a letter written by Polycarp to the Christians in the city of Philippi and a book written about him—specifically about his arrest, trial, and execution—that we will consider later in our course.
  - C. In this lecture, we are particularly interested in the letter that Polycarp himself wrote, at the request of the Philippians for some advice.
- II. The letter is one of the shorter and, one must admit, least inspiring of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.
  - A. It consists largely of generalized pieces of advice, often framed in very traditional language that consists of constant quotations of and allusions to earlier Christian writings (see, for example, ch. 10).
  - B. Nonetheless, there are some interesting aspects of the Letter of Polycarp. For one thing, it appears that he wrote the letter in response to the Philippians' request for a collection of the Letters of Ignatius (see 13:2).
    - 1. The Philippians had evidently met up with Ignatius and were interested in collecting his writings.

2. Polycarp's church was where Ignatius had written four of his letters and where he had sent two others; thus, the church had at least six of Ignatius's writings ready to hand.
3. Scholars have sometimes wondered how Ignatius's letters had been gathered together into one manuscript that got copied through the Middle Ages. It may be that Polycarp himself made the collection that stands at the heart of the corpus of Ignatius's writings.

**III.** It is also interesting to note that the church in Philippi appears to have experienced a couple of problems that Polycarp is eager to address.

- A. To make sense of these problems, it would help to sketch a bit of background to the Christian congregation in Philippi.
- B. We know about the earlier history of this church from the letters of the apostle Paul, written at least 60 years earlier.
- C. Paul himself had established the church, and after he left, he learned of difficulties its members were having.
- D. He wrote the New Testament letter of Philippians to address the problems.
  1. One problem church members were experiencing was the presence of false teachers in their midst, "heretics" who were evidently teaching a Judaizing version of Christianity that insisted that Christians must follow the Jewish Law to be truly right with God (Phil. 3:2–3). Paul vehemently rejected this view.
  2. One other problem involved some infighting among prominent members of the congregation (Phil. 4:2).

**IV.** In Polycarp's day, the Philippian church had other difficulties, but they were broadly related to those confronted by Paul, because they again involved false teaching and internal turmoil.

- A. The false teaching now is no longer a Judaizing form of Christianity but a docetic form (recall that Ignatius had to deal with both problems). This is seen especially in the harsh invective of Polycarp's letter (6:3b–7:1).
  1. Polycarp opposed those who didn't believe that Jesus was human, and who denied a future resurrection and judgment.
  2. Some scholars have suspected that Polycarp was specifically opposing Marcion, a mid-2<sup>nd</sup> –century docetist, who took Paul's understanding of a difference between the law of the Jews and the Gospel of Christ to extremes.
  3. Marcion believed there were two gods: the wrathful god of the Old Testament, who created the world, and the merciful god of the New Testament.

- 4. For Marcion, the god of the Old Testament was not the God of Jesus, who, Marcion believed, descended from heaven as a fully grown adult in the *appearance* of flesh.
  - 5. The problem with the theory that Polycarp's letter is directed against Marcion is that Marcion probably propounded his theories about thirty years *after* Polycarp wrote his letter.
- B. The other problem involved a case of financial misdealing, in which one of the church leaders, Valens, and his unnamed wife had evidently absconded with some of the church funds (11:1).
- C. It is important to recall that wealth had always been a big issue for Christians, from the time of Jesus, who urged his followers to give up everything to follow him; through the period of the early Church, when some members of the community gave up all their goods for the sake of others (Acts 4:32–5:11!); and on down through the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, when churches themselves had begun to acquire some wealth.
- 1. Polycarp deals with this issue by repeatedly warning his readers against “the love of money.”
  - 2. It is striking to compare the vitriolic comments that Polycarp has for false teachers (“the first born of Satan”!) with the comparatively mild rebuke he has for those who have behaved immorally (11:4).
- D. Perhaps this is emblematic of the direction the Church as a whole was soon to go, where false doctrine was a far greater offense to God than immoral behavior.
- V. In sum, Polycarp writes the Philippians for four reasons: to give them some advice and moral exhortation, to provide them with a collection of Ignatius's letters, to deal with the problem of false teaching in their midst, and to discuss the problem of embezzlement that had occurred in their midst. In fulfilling these tasks, he constantly quotes earlier Christian texts as authorities for his views. In the next lecture, we'll see why that is significant for understanding how one set of Christian texts actually became a canon of sacred Scripture.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 324–353.

Clayton Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp. 72–83.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

P. N. Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. The Philippian church was concerned both about false teaching (*heresy*) and immoral behavior. Do churches today confront one or both of these problems still? Which seems to be the more common “issue” that Christians are concerned about?
2. How do Christians today deal with the problem of wealth? Is it seen as a problem any longer? If not, has Christianity changed radically from its early days, when believers gave up all they had for the sake of others? Is this a justifiable change?

# Lecture Eight

## The Use of Authorities in the Early Church

**Scope:** Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians is significant for a number of reasons, not least of which is the extensive use it makes of earlier Christian writings (including the Gospels and the writings of Paul) as authorities for how Christians should live and what they should believe. In some ways, this marks the beginning of the process by which certain early Christian writings were considered authoritative for the life and practice of the Church. Eventually, that process was to lead to the formation of a *canon* of Scripture, the "New" Testament, a collection of books that was accepted as standing on equal footing with the writings of the "Old" Testament (the Jewish Scriptures).

In this lecture, we will use the Letter of Polycarp as a springboard into considering the motivations Christians had in devising a canon of Scripture and the criteria they used in deciding which books were to be considered canonical and which not.

### Outline

- I. In the previous lecture, we looked at the Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians, written to address several of the problems that the church was facing.
  - A. We saw that one of the most intriguing features of this letter is that large chunks of it consist of nothing other than allusions to or quotations from earlier Christian writings.
  - B. Sometimes, this indebtedness to earlier authorities is acknowledged, for example, in 2:2a, 3.
  - C. But other times, there are simply allusions and what appear to be brief unacknowledged quotations, for example, in 1:3–2:2a.
  - D. And there are times when the quotations appear to come from authorities that later were not included in the New Testament but that, for Polycarp, are just as authoritative as books that were included (for example, the four allusions to 1 Clement at the end of chapter 4).
  - E. Polycarp's use of earlier authorities leads us to the broader question of how Christians in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century were beginning to use written texts as authoritative guides to faith and practice.
- II. This ultimately is the question of the beginnings of the formation of a Christian canon of Scripture.
  - A. Eventually, Christians developed and promoted a set canon of authoritative writings, the New Testament.

- B. The idea that a religion would be based on written texts was virtually unheard of in the Roman world.
  - 1. None of the pagan religions relied on texts in the ways Christians did, to know what to believe and how to act.
  - 2. Ancient pagan religions were polytheistic and designed to promote the peace of the gods. They were practice-based—sacrifices and prayers.
  - 3. Belief was not important and thus texts were not important.
  - 4. Judaism was, of course, a partial exception, but at the beginning of the Christian movement, not even the Jews had a “closed” canon of Scripture.
- C. Questions about the formation of the Christian canon continue to intrigue scholars.
  - 1. Why did Christians begin to rely on written texts for the most basic aspects of their religion: faith and practice?
  - 2. When did they start collecting books into a canon?
  - 3. Who decided which books should be included? On what grounds? And when were the decisions finalized?
  - 4. These are the sorts of questions that we will explore in this lecture, given the nature of Polycarp’s Letter to the Philippians as a pastiche of earlier Christian authorities.

### III. Christianity, of course, actually started with a canon of sorts.

- A. As a Jew, Jesus relied on and interpreted the Torah, the Law of Moses, found in the first five books of what became the Jewish Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament).
- B. Jesus’ followers, such as Paul, appealed extensively to the Jewish Scriptures in support of their understandings of God.

### IV. It was not long before Christians started appealing to other, distinctively Christian authorities.

- A. Jesus’ words were accepted as having an equal authority with Scripture (and came to be regarded as scriptural: cf. 1 Tim. 5:18 and Polycarp 2:3).
- B. So, too, the writings of his apostles began to be considered sacred authorities (cf. 2 Pet. 3:16 and Polycarp 3:1).

### V. But the problem arose that there were numerous writings that claimed to convey the teachings of Jesus and the views of his apostles, and a good number of these were, in fact, forgeries.

- A. We know of numerous other Gospels, Acts, epistles, and apocalypses from the first three centuries of Christianity, most of them claiming to be written by apostles.
- B. How were Christians to know which of these were to be accepted?

- C. Eventually, Church leaders devised four criteria that they applied to books to determine whether they could be accepted as Scripture.
  - 1. A book had to be ancient (from near the time of Jesus).
  - 2. It had to be written by an apostle (or a companion of the apostles).
  - 3. It had to be widely used throughout the entire Church (not just a local favorite).
  - 4. And most important, it had to be *orthodox* (meaning that it taught the “right belief”).
- D. It was this last point that was the biggest sticking point, because of course, everyone who taught any form of Christianity understood themselves to be teaching the “right” things!

**VI.** The formation of the canon was not a quick decision reached by a Church council, but a long, drawn-out affair that actually took centuries.

- A. Even though we can trace its beginning stages with such writings as Polycarp’s Letter to the Philippians, the debates over which books to include dragged out over long stretches of time and led to quite heated disagreements.
- B. We can see this in the surviving *canon lists* from the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, where the authors indicate which books they find acceptable as Scripture and which not. (Is Revelation part of the canon? Is the Apocalypse of Peter? Is 3 John? Is 1 Clement?)
- C. The process moved toward a conclusion near the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced in a letter written by the powerful bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, who in A.D. 367, wrote to his churches, indicating which books were to be accepted as canonical. Here for the first time do we find a list that contains our 27 books—and only these books.

**VII.** In sum, the Letter of Polycarp shows us the early stages of a movement to consider earlier apostolic writings to be authoritative for the faith and practice of Christians. Eventually, this movement would result in the formation of the New Testament that has come down to us today.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, pp. 309–316.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, pp. 229–246.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*.

Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. In your judgment, what should have been the most important criteria for determining whether a book could be accepted into the canon or not? If a book was accepted because it was thought to be written by an apostle (for example, 1 Timothy or Hebrews or the book of Revelation) but later scholars have shown conclusively that it was not, in fact, written by that person, should that have any bearing on its canonical status?
2. In your opinion, should the canon of the New Testament continue to be “closed,” or should Christians have the right to add other books to the list or remove some that made it in?

# Lecture Nine

## The First Martyrology—Polycarp

**Scope:** Polycarp of Smyrna is arguably the best known of the Apostolic Fathers. In addition to the letter sent to him by Ignatius and the letters sent by him to the Philippians, we have a detailed account of his arrest, trial, and execution as a martyr, evidently written by an eyewitness. The Martyrdom of Polycarp is our first surviving Christian *martyrology* (account of a Christian's execution).

In this account, we learn how the authorities decide to go after the now-aged Polycarp (he claims to be 86 years old at the time) and send him into the amphitheater, where he is put on trial before the pagan masses and ordered to be burned at the stake. The account goes on to describe in graphic detail the execution itself, including the attendant miracles worked by God on behalf of his beloved saint. In this lecture, we will consider the details of the account in order to understand better why Christians in the early Church aroused such opposition from the local authorities, sometimes leading to their persecution and death.

### Outline

- I. We have already met Polycarp, the early-2<sup>nd</sup>-century bishop of Smyrna, twice. He is best known, however, in a book written about his arrest, trial, and martyrdom.
  - A. The Martyrdom of Polycarp is the earliest account of a Christian martyrdom from outside the New Testament.
  - B. Within the New Testament itself, the first recorded instance of a Christian martyr is the killing of Stephen in the book of Acts.
    - 1. In Stephen's case, the execution is an act of mob violence.
    - 2. In Polycarp's case, the execution is an "official" act, in that a Roman governor orders his death.
    - 3. This will raise for us broader questions about the persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities in the first two centuries: Why were Christians persecuted and sometimes martyred? Did they practice an illegal religion? If Christianity was not illegal, why were Christians sometimes tortured and killed? How often did this happen? And where?
    - 4. In the next lecture, we will deal with some of these broader questions. In this lecture, we will focus on what our earliest surviving martyrology, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, can tell us about such things.
- II. The record of Polycarp's arrest, trial, and execution is not a disinterested historical narrative but, evidently, an eyewitness account, written in a letter

from the Christians of Smyrna to the church of Philomelium (in Asia Minor).

- A. We know nothing about the author, except his name, Marcion (unrelated to the heretic of the same name).
- B. The letter appears to have been written soon after the event itself.
- C. It is written, not as an “objective” description but with a clear theological agenda.
  - 1. According to this account, Polycarp’s death was “in accordance with the Gospel” (1:1).
  - 2. In other words, his death was in “imitation” of the death of Christ.
  - 3. Thus, a number of details in the account conform with the stories we have in the Gospels about Jesus’ death: Polycarp knows in advance how he will die; he is betrayed by those close to him; he submits to God’s will rather than trying to escape; he prays before he is arrested; the arresting officer is named Herod; he rides into town on a donkey, and so on. The parallels are numerous and noteworthy.

**III.** The account actually begins with the martyrdoms, and near martyrdoms, of others in the Christian community (2:1).

- A. There is a graphic description of the torments Christians experienced (2:2).
- B. But we are told that they were supernaturally (and theologically) supported in their time of suffering (2:2–3).
- C. The clear message is that when subjected to this treatment, Christians are to face it boldly—as, for example, Germanicus did (3:1) (cf. Ignatius!).
- D. But another clear lesson is that no Christian is to *seek* martyrdom (cf. Quintus in ch. 4).

**IV.** The detailed account of Polycarp’s martyrdom is designed not only to inform the reader of how Polycarp died but also to set him up as an example to be followed.

- A. Polycarp did not seek martyrdom (5:1), but he was not inclined to turn away from it either (5:2).
- B. The administrative officers torture slaves to find Polycarp’s whereabouts and track him down (6:1–7:2).
- C. One of the surprising features of the account to many readers is that the authorities actually want to let Polycarp off the hook and urge him to do what is necessary to escape punishment (8:2; 9:2–3).
  - 1. This shows, on the one hand, that the Romans were not out for Christian blood.

2. It also shows what the “crime” of the Christians was: not the practice of Christianity but the unwillingness to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Roman state and its gods.
  3. Moreover, it shows that it was the populace, not their leaders, who were particularly intent on having the Christians killed (cf. 10:1–2).
  4. Being killed for “confessing Christ” or “admitting to being a Christian” (12:1), then, is a shorthand way of expressing the crime.
- D. The account also shows why Christians could take comfort while faced with such awful tortures: They believed that they would be rewarded eternally and their persecutors would face eternal torment (11:2).

V. Eventually, Polycarp is executed by being burned at the stake.

- A. The mob wants him to face the wild beasts, but that part of the day’s entertainment had ended (12:2).
- B. The preparation of the pyre is designed to show Jews as particularly culpable in Polycarp’s death (13:1).
- C. Throughout the account, Polycarp’s calm assurance is in full evidence (ch. 14).
- D. Moreover, God’s miraculous intervention on behalf of his faithful one is there for all with eyes to see (15:1–16:2).
- E. It is interesting to see that the Christians—already here in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century—are inclined to view the physical body of the saint as itself sanctified (13:2; 17:2; 18:2).

VI. We can draw several conclusions about early Christian martyrdom from this account.

- A. The instigators of persecution tended to be the pagan mobs.
- B. The charges had to do with failing to worship the state gods (*atheism*).
- C. Officials became involved only when compelled to do so and, then, somewhat reluctantly.
- D. Christians evidenced a range of reactions to their persecution and potential martyrdoms.
- E. And Christians developed a range of theological reflections on the significance of their opposition.
  1. For example, ultimately, it was the devil who was responsible.
  2. But God would provide divine succor to those who were faithful and an angelic existence afterward.
  3. The temporary torments were nothing in comparison to eternal damnation.
  4. Those who experienced the ultimate test of their faith were somehow sanctified, and their bodies themselves were holy.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “Martyrdom of Polycarp,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 357–401.

Clayton Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp. 84–97.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

Gary Bisbee, *Pre-Decian Acts of Martyrs and Commentarii*.

W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, esp. pp. 268–302.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. In your opinion, are there any beliefs, worldviews, sacred practices, or philosophical ideas worth *dying* for?
2. Try to imagine the Christian persecution from a Roman pagan’s point of view: Why would people otherwise widely tolerant of differences (pagans) be so intent on torturing and killing Christians who refused to recant?

# Lecture Ten

## The Persecution of the Christians

**Scope:** The account of the Martyrdom of Polycarp can serve as a springboard into a broader consideration of the persecution and occasional martyrdom of early Christians. In this lecture, we will consider such topics as the following: Why were the early Christians persecuted? Who was responsible for the opposition against them? Is it true that they practiced an “illegal” religion? If the religion was not, technically speaking, illegal, what were the judicial grounds for the Christians’ trials and executions? Did Christians go into hiding (for example, in the catacombs) to avoid detection? What were the Christian attitudes toward their persecution? Did some Christians recant their faith in order to avoid torture and death?

### Outline

- I. In our previous lecture, we began to explore the question of early Christian persecution and martyrdom through the Martyrdom of Polycarp, one of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.
  - A. The word *martyr* comes from a Greek word that means “witness.” Martyrs were those who were the ultimate witnesses to their faith.
  - B. The tradition of Christian martyrs had precedent among Jews, some of whom, in the course of their history, were executed for their refusal to abandon the ways of the Torah.
    1. In 2 Maccabees, there is a precedent for Christian martyrdom.
    2. The Maccabeans revolted against their Syrian overlords, who wanted them to renounce Judaism. Many of the Maccabeans preferred death to giving up their faith.
    3. It is noteworthy that under the Roman Empire, Jews were, by and large, exempt from official persecution, because they had an ancient religion, and the Romans respected antiquity.
  - C. Christians were sometimes persecuted “unofficially” through such penalties as social ostracism or rejection from families.
  - D. In this lecture, however, we are principally interested in “official” persecution by administrators of the Roman state.
  - E. This, of course, was how Jesus himself died, and Ignatius and Polycarp after him.
  - F. On what grounds were Christians persecuted? How widespread was their persecution? How did they typically react to it? These are some of the questions we will address in this lecture.

- G. We will consider instances of official persecution of Christians under three different Roman emperors: Nero (emperor from A.D. 54–68), Trajan (r. A.D. 98–117), and Marcus Aurelius (r. A.D. 161–180).
- II. The persecution in Rome under Nero is the first instance we have of an official stand taken against Christians by a Roman emperor.
- A. Prior to this, Christians were evidently too insignificant for much notice to be taken.
  - B. Even Nero's persecution was a localized affair.
  - C. Our only extensive account is in the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus.
    1. Tacitus indicates that Nero arranged for parts of Rome to be burned (by arson) in order to allow him to rebuild it according to his own architectural designs.
    2. When the population came to suspect that he was himself the culprit, he blamed the Christians and used them as scapegoats.
    3. The Christians who were rounded up were then subjected to terrible tortures and death.
  - D. Several features of this persecution make it distinctive.
    1. Christians were not persecuted for being Christians but for arson (although the charge was false).
    2. The persecution was limited to Rome itself.
    3. Nonetheless, Nero's treatment of Christians may have set a precedent for later emperors.
- III. The next state-sponsored persecution that we learn about is some 50 years later, under the emperor Trajan.
- A. We know of the incident from the writings of Pliny the Younger, governor of Bythinia.
  - B. Problems had arisen in his province involving meetings of secret societies, including the society of Christians.
  - C. In his 10<sup>th</sup> letter back to the emperor, Pliny indicates what the problem is and asks whether his method of dealing with it is appropriate.
    1. When someone is declared a Christian, he has the person perform an act of reverence to the likeness of the emperor.
    2. Anyone who does so is recognized as a non-Christian and released; anyone who refuses is recognized as a Christian and is punished with death.
  - D. Trajan replies in his return letter that this procedure is acceptable, although Christians are not to be hunted out and anonymous accusations are not to be accepted.
    1. It is important to note that this procedure shows that becoming a Christian is not a crime; *remaining* a Christian is.

2. The explanation probably relates to what we found in the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Christians were feared because they did not worship the state gods, who could be severe if not properly revered.

**IV.** The third instance of a state-sponsored persecution happened about 50 years later still, this time under the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius.

- A. This persecution we learn about not from a Roman source but from an eyewitness account of the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne in Gaul (modern France).
- B. The account is preserved for us in the writings of the 4<sup>th</sup>-century church father Eusebius.
  1. It is a gory and graphic description of the torture and execution of otherwise unknown Christian men and women, such as Saturnus and Blandina.
  2. The account again shows that it was the pagan mobs who were out for blood but the pagan administrators who satisfied the mob's wishes.
  3. It also shows that the tortures were designed to lead Christians to recant, rather than to punish them *per se*.
  4. Sometimes, these efforts were successful.

**V.** In conclusion, we can make the following points about the persecution of Christians in the first two centuries A.D.:

- A. Persecutions were generally popularly motivated and the result of mob violence, from the ground up, not the top down.
- B. They were, as a result, highly sporadic.
- C. They were not based on Roman law *per se*; that is to say, Christianity was not, technically speaking, an illegal religion.
- D. Christians were punished not for having practiced an illegal religion but for being troublemakers, possibly immoral, and especially, for their refusal to worship the state gods.
- E. Fear of the gods is no doubt what ultimately drove pagans to persecute Christians: These persecutions, in other words, were *religious* acts by sincerely religious persons who took their religious views seriously.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, pp. 25–50.

Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

H. Musurillo, ed. *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*.

Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. How is it possible that a broadly tolerant set of religions, such as Roman paganism, would be so intolerant when it came to the Christians?
2. Discuss other instances in which precisely religious people, acting out their religion, cause pain, suffering, and even death for others.

# Lecture Eleven

## A Church Manual—The Didache of the Apostles

**Scope:** In this lecture, we turn to one of the most historically influential writings of the Apostolic Fathers, the Didache (“teaching”) of the Apostles. When the Didache was discovered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it made an enormous impact on scholarship: Here was a book written at about the time of the New Testament writings (c. A.D. 100) that offered a set of ethical instructions to Christians about how to live (similar in many ways to the Sermon on the Mount), detailed discussion of rituals practiced in the early Church (see the next lecture), and an account of wandering Christian apostles and prophets who had become a problem for some communities, because evidently, some scoundrels had begun to “sponge” off the churches they visited as a way to make a living off their preaching.

### Outline

- I. Occasionally, new discoveries of ancient manuscripts make headline news.
  - A. This was true of the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the wilderness to the west of the Dead Sea, not far from Jerusalem, in 1947.
  - B. It was also true of the Nag Hammadi library, containing a collection of Gnostic gospels, discovered in the wilderness of upper Egypt in 1945.
  - C. And it was true at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a copy of a book that was previously known only by title was discovered in a library in Constantinople.
    - 1. The manuscript was in the Library of the Holy Sepulchre.
    - 2. It was found by a Greek scholar, Philotheos Bryennios, in 1873.
    - 3. The most important text in the manuscript, called the Didache of the Apostles, was published by him nearly a decade later.
    - 4. This publication made an enormous splash not just among scholars but also in the popular press, because this was a book that appears to have been written at the same time as, or even earlier than, some of the books of the New Testament.
    - 5. In fact, it was a book that some early Christians believed belonged in the New Testament!
    - 6. Moreover, it was a book that provided information about aspects of early Christianity about which we are otherwise almost entirely ignorant, such as how the early churches were organized, how Christians practiced their religious rituals, and so on.
    - 7. All in all, this writing of the Apostolic Fathers is one of the most important books outside of the New Testament.

- D. The title of the book is found in the manuscript itself: the Didache (“teaching”) of the Apostles. (The book is anonymous, not pseudonymous.)
  - E. It appears to be a composite document, the result of an editor splicing together several earlier sources that dealt with various aspects of Christian life and worship.
- II. The Didache is significant in part because it addresses directly some of the key questions confronted by early Christians: How are Christians to behave? How are they to practice their religion? Whom are they to follow? And what are they to believe?
- A. How are Christians to behave (chs. 1–5)?
    - 1. This was always a central question for the followers of Jesus, from his time onward.
    - 2. Much of Jesus’ own teaching was ethical, even though it was set in a decidedly apocalyptic context.
    - 3. Once Christianity moved out into the world and stopped adhering so strictly to an apocalyptic worldview, the ethical questions remained.
    - 4. This was especially the case when Christianity, as a secret society, was looked upon with suspicion by outsiders.
  - B. The Didache addresses the question of ethical behavior by teaching the doctrine of the two paths, the path of life and the path of death.
    - 1. We know of this doctrine from other writings, both Jewish (the Manual of Discipline) and Christian (the Epistle of Barnabas).
    - 2. The “two paths” represent a way of organizing a set of important ethical instructions.
    - 3. In the Didache’s version, many of the instructions sound very similar to what Jesus proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount (see, for example, 1:3 ff.).
    - 4. But the bulk of the ethical injunctions, both positive and negative, have nothing explicitly Christian about them: They are simply solid ethical instructions for behavior in the world.
    - 5. This teaching of the two paths may have come from an earlier Jewish collection of ethical teaching. The goal is perfection, but it is recognized that the goal may be unattainable (6:2).
  - C. How are Christians to practice their religion (chs. 7–10)?
    - 1. The text gives explicit instructions concerning how to perform baptism (ch. 7).
    - 2. It gives directions concerning the practices of prayer and fasting (ch. 8).
    - 3. And it gives relatively lengthy instruction concerning how to practice the *eucharist*—the periodic thanksgiving meal that commemorated Jesus’ death (chs. 9–10).

**D. Whom are Christians to follow (chs. 11–15)?**

1. The Didache gives lengthy instruction concerning what to do about itinerant prophets who were Christian leaders, on the one hand, but were not permanent members of any church, on the other.
2. Itinerancy had been a practice among Christians since the days of Jesus himself and of his apostle Paul afterward.
3. By the time the Didache was written (A.D. 100 or so?), itinerant prophets—as opposed to stationary leaders—had become a problem, as evidenced in the details of the discussion.
4. In short, the problem was that some itinerants were making a living off of their prophetic ministries and were taking advantage of the local congregations.
5. The Didache then tries to put severe restrictions on what an itinerant prophet could and could not expect from a local congregation.
6. Moreover, the Didache appears to represent a transitional phase in the development of Church offices, because it urges the election of bishops and deacons (15:1).
7. Clearly, we are on the way to the kind of Church structure that we find in the pastoral epistles of the New Testament and the writings of Ignatius and Polycarp among the Apostolic Fathers, in which local leaders are the ones given ultimate authority over the affairs of the church.

**E. What are Christians to believe (ch. 16)?**

1. Christianity started out as an apocalyptic sect of Jewish followers of Jesus.
2. The earliest Christians after Jesus were also apocalyptically oriented, anticipating his imminent return in judgment (for example, the apostle Paul).
3. Some groups of Christians eventually changed the apocalyptic expectations of the early years and developed theological and practical views that were more adapted to having the Church established in this world, around for the long haul.
4. The ending of the Didache shows, however, that the apocalyptic vision continued to live on in some circles, with the expectation that a cataclysmic end was very near (ch. 16).
5. Unfortunately, this apocalyptic discourse, and the book itself, appears to end in mid-sentence; it seems that the conclusion was lost.

- III.** In sum, the Didache gives us a rare glimpse into the life and beliefs of the early Church; here is a “Church manual” that instructs its readers how to behave, how to practice their religion, whom to follow, and what to believe.

**Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “Didache,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 405–443.  
Clayton Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp. 32–51.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Jonathan Draper, ed. *The Didache in Modern Research*.

Clayton Jefford, ed. *The Didache in Context: Essays on Its Text, History, and Transmission*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Given the circumstance that the ethical prescriptions found in the Didache are not “explicitly” Christian (in that they seem to be ethical guidelines that would be applicable to all people, Christian or not), do you think there is such a thing as distinctively Christian morality?
2. The Church addressed by the Didache obviously had difficulty with itinerant prophets “sponging” off the local communities. Can you think of any comparable situations among religious communities today?

## Lecture Twelve

### Ritual in the Early Church

**Scope:** One of the most significant aspects of the Didache is that it gives a fairly detailed description of the main rituals used in the early Church—baptism, the eucharist, prayer, and fasting—indicating, for example, how these various Christian activities were to be performed. More than any other early Christian document, then, the Didache gives us insights into how Christians practiced their religion in the early communities.

In this lecture, we will consider these early Christian rituals, see how they developed in the decades before the Didache (starting with the life of Jesus himself), and see how they came to be fixed features in the life of the early Christian community.

### Outline

- I. In the previous lecture, we examined the important work among the Apostolic Fathers called the Didache.
  - A. The Didache contains several sections, which may have originally been independent of one another: one on ethical behavior, one on Church ritual, one on problems with itinerant prophets, and one describing the apocalyptic end of all things.
  - B. In this lecture, we will consider one of the most intriguing aspects of the Didache in greater depth, its discussion of Christian baptism and the practice of the eucharist.
  - C. These rituals were part and parcel of what it meant to be a Christian in the early decades of the Church.
    - 1. Sometimes, we are accustomed to thinking of Christianity as a religion rooted principally in beliefs—that is, as a kind of idea-centered religion, with doctrines, creeds, orthodoxies, and heresies.
    - 2. And it's true; Christianity in its early years was far more doctrinally oriented than were other religions of the Roman Empire.
    - 3. In part, this orientation stemmed from Christianity's claim to be the exclusive way of salvation, a claim made by no other religion in Roman antiquity.
    - 4. If faith in Christ was the only way to be right with God, it was important to know what that faith meant and to devise beliefs that were appropriate to it.
    - 5. But Christianity has always been far more than a set of beliefs, doctrines, dogmas, and creeds. It is also a *lived* religion (requiring ethics) and a *practiced* religion (requiring community rituals).

6. From the earliest of times, the two most important Christian rituals—and the two that have the most space devoted to them in the Didache—were baptism and the eucharist.
  7. Where did these rituals come from, how were they practiced, and what did they mean?
- II. Baptism was always a part of the Christian religion and, from its earliest days, was practiced as an initiation ritual—the way a person came to join the community of Jesus' followers.
  - A. Christian baptism actually had its roots in the baptizing practices of John the Baptist.
    1. John was a Jewish apocalyptic prophet, anticipating an imminent end of the world, who baptized people who repented of their sins in preparation for the coming onslaught.
    2. Apocalypticism was a worldview shared by many Jews of the first century. It can be traced back to the time of the Maccabean Revolt.
    3. Prior to that time, the prevalent worldview was the prophetic view: people suffered because of their sins—God punished them for their sins. When they returned to God, he would relent and return them to good times. This was the teaching of the prophets.
    4. During the time of the Maccabeans, Jews were being persecuted for their religion. This gave rise to the belief that sin is a cosmic, demonic force; God would intervene in this evil age to establish his good kingdom on Earth, and this coming age was imminent. There would be a Judgment Day: Those who did not side with God would be penalized; those who did side with God would prosper.
    5. John the Baptist held to this apocalyptic worldview.
    6. His baptism appears to have differed from that of other Jewish groups and sects in that it was a one-time rite, not a regularly repeated one.
    7. Jesus himself was baptized by John, no doubt indicating at the very least that he started out as one of John's followers who accepted his apocalyptic message.
    8. During his lifetime, Jesus and his followers may well have either encouraged others to be baptized by John or practiced baptism rituals themselves.
  - B. It is clear that immediately after Jesus' death, his followers continued the practice of baptizing those who chose to join their community.
    1. This can be seen, for example, in traditions recorded about Jesus' final instructions (Matthew 28:19–20) and in the narratives of the early years of the religion found in the book of Acts.
    2. It is also seen in the writings of our earliest Christian author, Paul.
    3. Paul, however, appears to have had a distinctive understanding of the significance of baptism (Rom. 6). It was not merely an act symbolizing cleansing of sin upon repentance, but it was actually a

- ritualistic union of the believer with Christ in his death, intimately tied to the gift of salvation.
- 4. This, our earliest understanding of baptism, is different from theological understandings of the act that have come down to Christianity today.
  - C. Eventually, baptism was seen less as an efficacious rite (as in Paul) and more as an initiation ritual, reserved for those who not only had faith but had also passed a period of repentance and learning—the catechumenate.
  - D. The Didache does not reflect on a theology of baptism but, instead, describes how it was to be practiced.

**III.** The practice of the eucharist described in the Didache also has its roots in the ministry of Jesus himself.

- A. One of the oldest traditions about Jesus is that he held a last supper with his disciples, in which he interpreted his coming death in light of the symbolic foods at the meal.
  - 1. The meal itself was a Passover feast, which was already rich with symbolic connotations.
  - 2. Jesus reinterprets the symbolism in light of the new act of salvation that God is now to perform.
  - 3. Moreover, he urges his followers to continue to celebrate the meal in light of that salvation.
- B. Our earliest record of the practice of eucharist (or “thanksgiving”) is again in the writings of Paul.
  - 1. That Paul took this meal very seriously is evident in his strict instructions to the Corinthians concerning it.
  - 2. It does not appear, however, that the meal was seen by Paul to be efficacious *per se*—that is, that it had a direct effect on one’s salvation.
  - 3. It was, instead, a periodic reminder of the salvation that Christ had brought.
  - 4. During Paul’s time, the eucharist appears to have been an actual meal, not simply a symbolic taking of bread and wine.
- C. That appears to be the case as well with the Didache.
  - 1. This was a periodic meal eaten by members of the community.
  - 2. The Didache gives instruction not so much about how the meal was to be conducted or about how it was to be understood but, instead, about the prayers that were to be said in conjunction with the meal (chs. 9–10).
  - 3. It should be noted that there are many Jewish elements in these prayers, indicating perhaps that these are very old eucharistic prayers generated in the early years of the Christian religion, when most Christians still considered themselves Jewish.

- D. Eventually the eucharist was seen to be more than a symbolic recollection of Jesus' death.
    - 1. This can be seen, for example, in the writings of Ignatius, who speaks of the eucharistic bread as the "medicine that brings immortality."
    - 2. As time went on, Christian theologians began to attach greater and greater significance to the elements of the eucharist as being the actual body and blood of Christ.
  - E. At the time of the Didache, however, the eucharist appears to be quite different: It is an actual meal at which Christ's act of salvation is celebrated and remembered and thanks is appropriately rendered to God through a series of set prayers.
- IV.** In the Didache, we see the development of Church rituals, as these have moved beyond their status in the time of Paul (the 50s A.D.) but before they can be seen as "sacraments" that are the means by which God bestows his grace upon individual believers.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, pp. 343–360.

Everett Ferguson, ed., *Worship in Early Christianity*.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*.

Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

- 1. In what ways are the practices of baptism and eucharist that you're familiar with, either personally or as you've heard about them, different from the ways they are described in the Didache?
- 2. Does it seem to you that these rituals eventually took on "magical" qualities in later Christian thinking about them?

## Timeline

4 B.C.?	Jesus' birth
A.D. 14–37	Emperor Tiberius
26–36	Pilate as Governor of Judea
30?	Jesus' death
33?	Conversion of Paul
37–41	Emperor Caligula
41–54	Emperor Claudius
50–60	Pauline Epistles
50?–110	Ignatius of Antioch
54–68	Emperor Nero
62–113	Pliny the Younger
65?	Gospel of Mark
66–70	Jewish Revolt and destruction of the Temple
69–79	Emperor Vespasian
70–156	Polycarp of Smyrna
79–81	Emperor Titus
80–85?	Gospels of Matthew and Luke, book of Acts
81–96	Emperor Domitian
90–95?	Gospel of John
95?	Clement of Rome
95?	Book of Revelation
96?	1 Clement
98–117	Emperor Trajan
100?	The Didache
100–165	Justin Martyr
100–160?	Marcion
110–140?	The Shepherd of Hermas
120–140?	Papias

- 130–200 ..... Irenaeus
- 135? ..... Epistle of Barnabas
- 140–160? ..... 2 Clement
- 155? ..... Martyrdom of Polycarp
- 160–225 ..... Tertullian
- 180–190? ..... Letter to Diognetus
- d. 190 ..... Melito of Sardis
- 249–251 ..... Emperor Decius
- 260–340 ..... Eusebius
- 285–337 ..... Constantine (emperor, 306–337)
- 300–375 ..... Athanasius
- 303–312 ..... The “Great Persecution”
- 312 ..... “Conversion” of Constantine
- 325 ..... Council of Nicea

## Glossary

**Adoptionism:** The view that Jesus was not divine but was a flesh-and-blood human being who had been adopted by God to be his son at his baptism.

**Apocalypse:** A literary genre common in ancient Judaism and Christianity, in which a mortal prophet is given visions either of the heavenly realm or the future fate of the Earth and is told how these visions can explain the mundane realities faced by the Church.

**Apocalypticism:** A worldview held by many ancient Jews and Christians that maintained that the present age is controlled by forces of evil but that these will be destroyed at the end of time, when God intervenes in history to bring in his kingdom, an event thought to be imminent.

**Apologists:** Group of 2<sup>nd</sup>- and 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Christian intellectuals who wrote treatises defending Christianity against charges leveled against it.

**Apology:** Literally “defense,” used as a technical term for a reasoned defense of the faith against its opponents.

**Apostle:** From a Greek word meaning “one who is sent.” In early Christianity, the term designated emissaries of the faith who were special representatives of Christ.

**Apostolic succession:** The doctrine espoused by members of the proto-orthodox community that their version of the Christian faith could be traced through a series of Christian leaders all the way back to the apostles themselves.

**Baptism:** The Christian practice that became an “initiation” ritual in which a person was made a member of the community through immersion in (or sprinkling of) water.

**Bishop:** The Greek word for bishop literally means “overseer.” Originally, bishops were simply the leaders of the local churches; by the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, bishops were beginning to receive greater power to make all the authoritative decisions in the church.

**Canon:** From a Greek word that literally means “ruler” or “straight edge.” The term is used to designate a recognized collection of texts; the New Testament canon is, thus, the collection of books that Christians have traditionally accepted as authoritative.

**Catechumenate:** A term that refers to the period of instruction in the rudiments of the Christian faith undertaken by converts who were preparing for baptism.

**Charismatic community:** A religious community that is organized not under the leadership of individuals but in which every member has a “gift” (Greek: *charisma*) of the Spirit that enables the community to function together.

**Chiliasm:** From the Greek word for a “thousand,” *chiliasm* refers to the belief that there would be a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on Earth (also called the *millennium*).

**Deacons:** From a Greek word that literally means “ministers,” deacons were leaders in the Church who were predominantly concerned with the physical well-being of its members (for example, they had charge of alms collection and the like).

**Dead Sea Scrolls:** First discovered in 1947 in caves near the west shore of the Dead Sea, these are Jewish writings that contain a number of copies of the Hebrew Bible, commentaries, rules for how the community was to live together, and other important documents.

**Deutero-Pauline Epistles:** Letters of the New Testament that claim to be written by Paul but appear to have been written instead by his followers in the next generation; these include Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

**Docetism:** The view that Jesus was not a human being but only “appeared” to be; from a Greek word that means “to seem” or “to appear.”

**Doctrine of the two paths:** A form of ethical instruction found in both the Didache and the Letter of Barnabas, in which readers are told that they have the choice of following either the path of light (or life) or darkness (death), depending on how they choose to live.

**Ebionites:** A group of 2<sup>nd</sup>-century adoptionists who maintained Jewish practices and Jewish forms of worship.

**Eucharist:** From a Greek word that literally means “giving thanks,” this is a technical term that refers to the commemoration of Christ’s death in a periodic sacred meal (the Lord’s Supper), as instituted in the Last Supper.

**Gnosticism:** A group of ancient religions, closely related to Christianity, that maintained that sparks of a divine being had become entrapped in the present, evil world and could escape only by acquiring the appropriate secret *gnosis* (Greek for “knowledge”) of who they were and how they could escape. This *gnosis* was generally thought to have been brought by an emissary descended from the divine realm.

**Heresy:** Any worldview or set of beliefs deemed by those in power to be deviant; from a Greek word that means “choice” (because “heretics” have “chosen” to deviate from the “truth”; see **orthodoxy**).

**Judaizing:** Any approach to Christianity that insists that followers of Jesus continue to keep the Jewish Law.

**Manual of Discipline:** One of the documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which like some of the early Christian texts, contains the doctrine of the two paths.

**Marcionites:** Followers of Marcion, the second-century Christian scholar and evangelist, later labeled a heretic for his docetic Christology and his belief in two Gods, the harsh legalistic God of the Jews and the merciful loving God of Jesus—views that he claimed to have found in the writings of Paul.

**Martyr:** From the Greek word for “witness,” a Christian martyr is anyone who bears ultimate witness to Christ, that is, by dying for him.

**Martyrology:** A literary text that describes the trial and execution of a martyr or a group of martyrs, such as the Martyrdom of Polycarp.

**Monepiscopacy:** The teaching, first found in the Letters of Ignatius, that there should be one and only one leader of the Church—the bishop—who makes all the important administrative decisions and provides all the important theological and spiritual guidance.

**Muratorian Canon:** An 8<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript, copied probably from a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century original, that lists the books that its author considered to belong to the New Testament canon. This is probably our earliest surviving canon list.

**Orthodoxy:** Literally, “right opinion”; a term used to designate a worldview or set of beliefs acknowledged to be true by the majority of those in power. For its opposite, see **heresy**.

**Paganism:** Any of the polytheistic religions of the Greco-Roman world; an umbrella term for ancient Mediterranean religions other than Judaism and Christianity.

**Pesher:** A method of interpretation found in some of the biblical commentaries among the Dead Sea Scrolls, in which a text was cited, followed by an explanation of its contemporary relevance (“this is what it means”).

**Pope:** From a word related to “papa,” this refers to the bishop of the church of Rome, understood to be the head of the entire Christian Church.

**Presbyters:** From a Greek word that literally means “elders,” these were the official leaders of local Christian congregations.

**Proto-orthodoxy:** A form of Christianity endorsed by some Christians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries (including the Apostolic Fathers) that promoted doctrines that were declared “orthodox” by the victorious Christian party in the 4<sup>th</sup> and later centuries.

**Torah:** From a Hebrew word that means something like “law” or “guidance,” the term *Torah* refers either to the Law given by God to Moses or to the five first books of the Hebrew Bible, allegedly written by Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

**Trinity:** Key doctrine of orthodox Christianity that maintains that the godhead consists of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are all equally God, even though there is only one God.

## Biographical Notes

**Athanasius:** Athanasius was a highly influential and controversial bishop of Alexandria throughout the middle half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Born around A.D. 300, he was active in the large and powerful Alexandrian church already as a young man, appointed as deacon to the then-bishop, Alexander. He served as secretary at the important Council of Nicea in 325, which attempted to resolve critical issues concerning the nature of Christ as fully divine, of the same substance as God the father, and co-eternal with the father.

As bishop of Alexandria from 328–375, Athanasius was a staunch defender of this Nicene understanding of Christ and a key player in the development of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, in which there were three distinct persons (Father, Son, and Spirit) who were nonetheless one God, all of the same substance. This defense created enormous difficulties for Athanasius in the face of powerful opposition, to which he reacted with a show of force (even violence). He was sent into exile on several occasions during his bishopric, spending nearly 16 years away from Alexandria while trying to serve as its bishop.

Author of numerous surviving works, Athanasius is also significant for his role in determining which books should be accepted in his churches as sacred Scripture. In 367, in his 39<sup>th</sup> annual “Festal Letter,” which like all the others, set the date for the celebration of Easter and included pastoral instruction, he indicated that the 27 books that we now have in the New Testament, and only those 27, should be regarded as canonical. This decree helped define the shape of the canon for all time and helped lead to the declaration of other books, such as the Gnostic gospels and the like, as heretical.

**Athenagoras:** Not much is known about the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Christian apologist Athenagoras, as he is scarcely mentioned in the writings of other church fathers. The few references to him that survive indicate that he was a Greek philosopher who lived in Athens. His best known work is his Christian “Apology” (“Defense”), addressed to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, probably written in 177. In it, he defends Christians against charges of atheism and crass immorality involving incestuous orgies and ritual cannibalism and tries to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith to all others. Among his notable contributions to Christian theology is his indication that Christians worship three who are God (the Father), the Son, and the Holy Spirit; eventually, such reflections led to the formation of the classical doctrine of the Trinity.

**Barnabas:** We are not well informed about the historical Barnabas. He is mentioned both by the apostle Paul (Gal. 2:13; 1 Cor. 9:6) and the book of Acts (Acts 9:27; 11:22–26) as one of Paul’s traveling companions, and it appears that he was originally a Hellenistic Jew who converted to faith in Christ, then

became, like Paul, a traveling missionary who spread the faith. The book of Acts goes so far as to consider him one of the apostles (Acts 14:4, 14).

The Epistle (or Letter) of Barnabas discussed in this course is attributed to him, but modern scholars are reasonably sure that he could not have written it. The book appears to have been written some time around A.D. 130 or 135, some 60 years or so after the historical Barnabas would have died. The book was attributed to him, then, by Christians who wanted to advance its authoritative claims as being rooted in the views of one of the most important figures from the early years of Christianity.

**Clement of Rome:** Clement of Rome is another figure about whom we do not have much information. Tradition indicates that he was the second or third bishop of Rome (the disciple Simon Peter having been the first). He may be mentioned in The Shepherd of Hermas as the “foreign correspondent” for the Roman church (prior to becoming bishop?). He is allegedly the author of both 1 and 2 Clement, but it is clear that these two books were written by two different persons, and in neither book is Clement ever mentioned, let alone named as the author.

**Diognetus:** Diognetus is the unknown recipient of the apology known as the Letter to Diognetus. Literally, his name means “born of Zeus.” Because he is called “most excellent” in the letter, there are some scholars who think that he must have been some kind of Roman official. There is known to have been a tutor of the emperor Marcus Aurelius by this name, and thus, some have argued that this is the intended recipient of the letter. It is also possible, however, that the name is meant merely as a cipher for anyone among the pagans who is interested in knowing about the Christian religion and for seeing that, far from being a danger to Roman society, it is, in fact, the one superior religion in the world.

**Eusebius:** Eusebius of Caesarea is one of the most important figures in the history of the early Church. Born around A.D. 260, he was trained by some of the leading Christian scholars of his time and was to become the first author to produce a full history of Christianity up to his own day, in a book called the *Ecclesiastical* (or *Church*) *History*. Eusebius was quite active in the politics of the Church and empire; ordained bishop of the large and important church of Caesarea in 315, he was active at the Council of Nicea and the theological disputes in its aftermath, originally opposing but later accepting the creedal statements about Christ that were to become orthodox. He died around A.D. 340.

Eusebius was a prolific writer, but it was his *Ecclesiastical History* in particular that made a significant impact on subsequent generations—down to our own day. This chronological sketch of early Christianity provides us with the majority of our information about the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world, the persecution of the early Christians, the conflicts between what Eusebius considered to be orthodoxy and heresies, the development of

Church offices and structures, and so on. Of particular value in this 10-volume work is Eusebius's frequent citation, often lengthy, of his sources, so that through his account, we have access to the writings of his Christian predecessors, which otherwise, have been lost to history. Thus, even though Eusebius puts his own slant on the history that he tells, it is possible to use the sources he cites to gain significant insight into the conflicts and developments that transpired in the Christian Church of the first three centuries, up to his own day.

**Hermas:** The author of *The Shepherd* is known to us only through the autobiographical references scattered throughout his work. It appears that he had been raised as a slave in the household of a woman named Rhoda, but that he had been set free while still young. He evidently then married and raised a family, in or around Rome.

In *The Shepherd*, Hermas recounts a number of symbolic visions that he received in which he was given instruction concerning the current state of the Christian Church and the need for people to repent in view of the imminent end to be brought by Christ. These visions are interpreted to him by angelic mediators, in particular, one that comes to him in the guise of a shepherd, hence the name of the book. This is the longest writing we have from the first two centuries of the Christian Church.

**Ignatius of Antioch:** Ignatius is one of the most interesting figures from the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. We know little of his life, except that he was bishop of the major church in Antioch, Syria, and had been arrested for Christian activities and was sent to Rome under armed guard to face execution by being thrown to the wild beasts in the Roman arena. En route to his martyrdom, Ignatius wrote seven surviving letters to churches that had sent representatives to greet him. In these letters, he warns against false teachers, urges the churches to strive for unity, stresses the need for the churches to adhere to the teachings and policies of the one bishop residing over each of them, and emphasizes that he is eager to face his violent death so that he might be a true disciple of Christ.

One of the letters Ignatius wrote was to the bishop of the city of Smyrna, Polycarp, who may have been the one who collected the other letters together. Within a couple of centuries, other Christian authors forged other letters allegedly by Ignatius; throughout the Middle Ages, these forgeries were circulated with the authentic letters and were not recognized for what they were until scholars undertook an assiduous examination of them in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Justin Martyr:** Justin was an important figure in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>-century church of Rome. Born of pagan parents (c. A.D. 100), evidently in Samaria, he undertook secular philosophical training before converting to Christianity when he was about 30. He began to teach the philosophical superiority of Christianity to secular learning, first in Ephesus and then in Rome, where he established a kind of Christian philosophical school in mid-century.

Justin is the first prominent Christian *apologist*, that is, one who defended the Christian faith against the charges of its cultured (pagan) despisers and strove to show its intellectual and moral superiority to anything that the pagan (or Jewish) world could offer. Three of his major works survive, usually known as his First Apology (a defense of Christianity addressed to the emperor Antoninus Pius and his sons, including Marcus Aurelius, around 155); his Second Apology (addressed to the Roman Senate around 160); and his Dialogue with Trypho, an account of his conversion and subsequent debate with a (possibly fictitious) Jewish rabbi, Trypho, over the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, based largely on an exposition of key passages in the Old Testament.

Justin's defense of Christianity led to political opposition; he was martyred on charges of being a Christian around 165.

**Marcion:** Marcion was one of the most infamous “heretics” of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Tradition indicates that he was born and raised in Sinope, on the southern shore of the Black Sea, where as a young man, he acquired considerable wealth as a shipping merchant. His father was allegedly the bishop of the Christian church there, who excommunicated his son for his false teachings. In A.D. 139, Marcion went to Rome, where he spent five years developing his theological views, before presenting them to a specially called council of the Church leaders. Rather than accepting Marcion’s understanding of the Gospel, however, the Church expelled him for false teaching. Marcion then journeyed into Asia Minor, where he proved remarkably successful in converting others to his understanding of the Christian message. “Marcionite” churches were in existence for centuries after his death, around A.D. 160.

Marcion’s understanding of the Gospel was rooted in his interpretation of the writings of the apostle Paul, whose differentiation between the Law (of the Old Testament) and the Gospel (of Christ) Marcion took to an extreme, claiming that the old and new were fundamentally different, so much so that they represented the religions of different Gods. Marcion, in other words, was a *ditheist*, who thought that the Old Testament God—who had created the world, called Israel to be his people, and gave them his Law—was a different god from the God of Jesus, who came into the world in the “appearance” of human flesh (because he was not actually part of the material world of the creator-god) to save people from the just but wrathful God of the Jews. Marcion’s views were based on his canon of Scripture—the first canon known to be formally advanced by a Christian—which did not, obviously, contain anything from the Old Testament but comprised a form of the Gospel of Luke and 10 of Paul’s letters (all those in the present New Testament except 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus).

**Marcus Aurelius:** Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121–180) ruled as Roman emperor from A.D. 161–180. He is probably best known as a “philosopher”-emperor, because he was one of the leading spokespersons for the philosophy of Stoicism in the ancient world. His private journal, *The Meditations*, still survives; in it, he

reflects on his life and urges himself to live rationally in light of his inner resources.

It was during the reign of Marcus Aurelius that Christians in Lyons and Vienne (in Gaul) were subject to the horrendous persecutions described in the Letter of Lyons and Vienne preserved for us in the writings of Eusebius.

**Minucius Felix:** Minucius Felix is an otherwise unknown Christian author from Latin-speaking North Africa who, sometime in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, wrote an apology called the *Octavian*. The book is named after one of the characters in the book, “Octavius,” who is said to enter into a long discussion with a pagan, Caecillian, over the competing virtues of the Christian versus the pagan religion. In the course of the discussion, Octavius not only lays out arguments for the superiority of the Christian philosophy, but he also describes the superior moral rectitude of the Christians. In so doing, he is compelled to address the charges leveled against the Christians that they are, in fact, prone to wild and licentious activities that make them socially disruptive and dangerous.

**Nero:** Nero (A.D. 37–68) was the Roman emperor in A.D. 54–68, during the time that the apostle Paul, for example, wrote his letters. For the history of early Christianity, he is probably best known as being the first emperor to persecute the Christians. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero arranged for the city of Rome to be burned to allow implementation of some of his own architectural designs for its reconstruction. When the populace came to suspect Nero’s involvement in the fire, he decided to lay the blame on the Christians, who were a widely despised group in any event; he had Christians rounded up, condemned for arson, and executed in gruesome and humiliating ways. Nero’s treatment of Christians may have set the stage for subsequent imperial persecutions.

**Papias:** Papias was an early- to mid-2<sup>nd</sup>-century proto-orthodox bishop of Hierapolis who is best known to history as author of a now-lost work called “Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord.” In this five-volume work, Papias describes the information he had received about Jesus’ teachings from the companions of his disciples. We know of the book only as it was quoted on occasion by later authors. These quotations show that numerous legendary expansions of the Gospel traditions were in circulation for decades after the composition of the New Testament Gospels. They also show that Papias was a *chiliast*, that is, that he subscribed to the view that there would be a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on Earth in which paradisiacal conditions would prevail. Later theologians considered this view naive and dangerous and, thus, chose not to preserve Papias’s writings.

**Paul the Apostle:** Paul was a Hellenistic Jew who was born and raised outside of Palestine. We do not know when he was born, but it was probably sometime during the first decade A.D. Through his own letters and the encomiastic account found in the book of Acts, we can learn something of his history. He

was raised as a strict Pharisaic Jew and prided himself in his scrupulous religiosity. At some point in his early adulthood, he learned of the Christians and their proclamation of the crucified man Jesus as the messiah; incensed by this claim, Paul began a rigorous campaign of persecution against the Christians—only to be converted himself to faith in Jesus through some kind of visionary experience.

Paul then became an ardent proponent of the faith and its best-known missionary. He saw his call as a missionary to the Gentiles and worked in major urban areas in the regions of Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia to establish churches through the conversion of former pagan. A distinctive aspect of his message was that all people, Jew and Gentile, are made right with God through Jesus' death and resurrection, and by no other means; the practical payoff was that Gentiles did not need to become Jewish in order to be among the people of the Jewish God—in particular, the men did not need to become circumcised.

We know about Paul principally through the letters he wrote to his churches when problems had arisen that he wanted to address. There are seven letters in the New Testament that indisputably come from his hand; six others claim him as an author, but there are reasons to doubt these claims. According to the book of Acts, Paul was eventually arrested for socially disruptive behavior and sent to Rome to face trial. An early tradition outside of the New Testament indicates that Paul was martyred there, in Rome, during the reign of the emperor Nero, in A.D. 64.

**Philotheus Bryennios:** Philotheus Bryennios (1833–1914) was a Greek scholar important in the annals of history for discovering the Didache in 1873, in the library of the Jerusalem Monastery of the Holy Sepulchre in Constantinople. He was born in Constantinople but was educated in Germany. The manuscript he discovered contained not only the Didache (which before this was unknown) but also the Letter of Barnabas, 1 and 2 Clement, and the epistles of Ignatius. It appears to have been produced in A.D. 1056. Many scholars hail this discovery as one of the greatest of the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Pliny the Younger:** Pliny the Younger (A.D. 62–113) is so named to differentiate him from his uncle, Pliny the Elder, a famous natural scientist and author who perished in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. As a young Roman aristocrat, Pliny the Younger received a top-rate literary education and is known from his literary remains, chiefly letters that he sent to the then-emperor Trajan from his post in the Asia Minor province of Bythinia, where he was appointed in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century to serve as governor.

Among the valuable information to be gleaned from these letters is an account of Pliny's proceedings against Christians, whom he treated as criminals deserving of death. When Christians were brought before him, he ordered them to perform a sacrifice to the image of the emperor; if they refused, he had them executed. Any Christians, however, who recanted their faith and made the sacrifice were released. This legal proceeding against the Christians was

sanctioned by Trajan himself and may represent the typical judicial actions against Christians in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century throughout the empire.

**Polycarp of Smyrna:** Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna, in Asia Minor, for most of the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Born around A.D. 70, he was martyred as a Christian in 156; the account of his arrest, trial, and execution (by being burned at the stake) is preserved for us in a firsthand report written in a letter by fellow Christians in Smyrna. This is the first detailed account of a martyrdom to survive from ancient Christianity outside the New Testament.

Some 45 years before his death, Polycarp had received a letter from Ignatius of Antioch, which still survives; Ignatius indicates that he had stayed in Smyrna en route to his own martyrdom in Rome and had come to know and respect the bishop there. In addition, we have a letter (or more likely, two letters, later spliced together) written by Polycarp himself to the Christians of Philippi, addressing ethical and theological issues that had arisen in their church.

Although not an original thinker, Polycarp was, thus, one of the most well known and important proto-orthodox leaders of the early and mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century. Later legend indicates that he had once been a companion of the apostle John and later became the teacher of Irenaeus; the latter claim may be right, but there appears to be little credible evidence for the former.

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# **After the New Testament: The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers**

## **Part II**

### **Professor Bart D. Ehrman**



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## Bart D. Ehrman, Ph.D.

Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies,  
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Bart Ehrman is the James A. Gray Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. With degrees from Wheaton College (B.A.) and Princeton Theological Seminary (M.Div. and Ph.D., magna cum laude), he taught at Rutgers for four years before moving to UNC in 1988. During his tenure at UNC, he has garnered numerous awards and prizes, including the Students' Undergraduate Teaching Award (1993), the Ruth and Philip Hettleman Prize for Artistic and Scholarly Achievement (1994), the Bowman and Gordon Gray Award for Excellence in Teaching (1998), and the James A. Gray Chair in Biblical Studies (2003).

With a focus on early Christianity in its Greco-Roman environment and a special expertise in the textual criticism of the New Testament, Professor Ehrman has published dozens of book reviews and more than 20 scholarly articles for academic journals. He has authored or edited 16 books, including *The Monk and the Messiah: The Story of How the New Testament Came to be Changed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005); *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford University Press, 1999); *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford, 1997; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2004); and *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford, 1993). He is currently at work on a new commentary on several non-canonical Gospels for the *Hermeneia Commentary* series, published by Fortress Press.

Professor Ehrman is a popular lecturer, giving numerous talks each year for such groups as the Carolina Speakers Bureau, the UNC Program for the Humanities, the Biblical Archaeology Society, and select universities across the nation. He has served as the president of the Society of Biblical Literature, Southeast Region; book review editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*; editor of the Scholar's Press Monograph Series *The New Testament in the Greek Fathers*; and co-editor of the E. J. Brill series *New Testament Tools and Studies*. Among his administrative responsibilities, he has served on the executive committee of the Southeast Council for the Study of Religion and has chaired the New Testament textual criticism section of the Society of Biblical Religion, as well as serving as Director of Graduate Studies and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UNC.

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# **After the New Testament: The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers**

## **Scope:**

At the very foundation of the Christian religion stand the writings of the New Testament, a collection of 27 books that represent the earliest surviving literary productions of the burgeoning Church and that eventually came to be regarded as sacred Scripture. The writings produced by Christians *after* the New Testament are also important, however, as they can reveal to us how Christianity changed, developed, and grew after the first Christian century had passed.

The writings of the Apostolic Fathers are the most important books for understanding these developments in Christianity immediately after the New Testament period. The term *Apostolic Father* was coined by scholars who believed that the authors of these books were companions or followers of the apostles of Jesus. Scholars today do not accept this older view, because the books in the collection appear to have been written in a later generation. But most of them do date from the early to mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century, and as such, they are among the earliest Christian writings from outside the New Testament.

There are 10 (or 11) authors who are traditionally included in the collection of the Apostolic Fathers. Some of the works are by well-known figures of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century (such as Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna); others are anonymous. Together, they represent the early writings of *proto-orthodoxy*—that is, they represent the views that eventually came to influence and inform the shape of Christianity as it was to grow into a world religion that eventually converted the Roman Empire and became the major religious (and political, social, cultural, and economic) force of the Middle Ages.

In this course, we will examine the various writings of the Apostolic Fathers, both to see what each of the surviving books has to say and to see how these books can instruct us about the emerging Christian Church of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

In rough outline, the lectures of the course are set up in “pairs,” in which the first lecture discusses the writing of one of the Apostolic Fathers and the next deals with the broader implications of the writing for understanding key issues in the early history of Christianity. We will begin with the letter of 1 Clement, written by the Christians of Rome to quell an uprising in the church of Corinth around A.D. 95; our examination of this letter will lead us, in the next lecture, to consider the development of a Church hierarchy in the early Christian communities.

Next, we will consider the Letters of Ignatius, one of the earliest Christian martyrs, whose writings urge adherence to the one bishop of each church and warn against false teachers. These letters will serve as a springboard to consider various kinds of “heresies” in early Christianity. Then, we will look at the letter written by Polycarp to the church in Philippi, which had experienced some

turmoil when one of its elders was caught red-handed in some kind of shady dealings; this letter quotes numerous earlier Christian writings and, thus, will allow us, in the next lecture, to consider how Christians began to appreciate earlier writings as canonical Scripture.

Another writing of the Apostolic Fathers is an account of Polycarp's own martyrdom; this eyewitness report will lead us to consider how, why, when, and where Christians were persecuted for their faith in the early years of the religion. Also significant among these writings is a book called the Didache, which contains ethical instructions for Christians and indicates how the Christian rites of baptism, eucharist, prayer, and fasting were to be practiced; this work will lead us then to consider the emergence of distinctively Christian rituals in the Church.

Next, we will turn to the so-called Letter of Barnabas, which was written to show the superiority of Christianity to Judaism. This letter will allow us to explore the nature of early Jewish-Christian relations and the rise of Christian anti-Semitism. From there, we will move to a study of a book (mis-)named 2 Clement, which in fact, is the earliest surviving Christian sermon from outside the New Testament. Because 2 Clement uses an allegorical approach to interpreting Scripture, it will enable us to consider more fully, in the next lecture, the various methods of interpretation used by early Christians in understanding their sacred texts.

This matter of interpretation is equally important for the next author we examine, Papias, whose works have come down to us only in fragments. Papias tells us that he prefers oral traditions to written texts in trying to understand what happened during the life of Jesus. This will bring us, in the next lecture, to a consideration of the importance of the oral transmission of early Christian tradition.

Next, we will turn to one of the earliest surviving apocalyptic writings of Christianity, The Shepherd of Hermas, which will, in turn, lead us to consider the importance of apocalyptic thought for the earliest followers of Jesus. As Christians moved away from an apocalyptic worldview, they began to have increased interactions with outsiders who were suspicious of their religion. The next writing we will consider is the anonymous Letter to Diognetus, which will serve as a springboard for considering the early *apologetic* movement, in which Christians defended themselves against charges of atheism and immorality and argued that their religion was, in fact, the only true one.

We will conclude our course by seeing how the Apostolic Fathers can instruct us concerning the development of Christianity in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, in the years between the foundation of the Church by Jesus and his disciples and the emergence of the Catholic Church of later times.

## Lecture Thirteen

### Barnabas and the Opposition to the Jews

**Scope:** The next writing of the Apostolic Fathers we consider, the Letter of Barnabas, was allegedly written by the traveling companion of Paul, Barnabas, but in fact, was written in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It is a long and intriguing letter that is chiefly concerned with one issue: how Christianity relates to its mother religion, Judaism. According to Barnabas, Christianity is superior to Judaism in every way, in that it is the religion that God had intended all along. Jews who do not realize this are condemned for their blindness and susceptibility to the teachings of an evil angel. More than that, the Jewish Scriptures, in fact, do not belong to the Jews; they belong to Christians.

These and other highly controversial teachings form the core of the Letter of Barnabas. In this lecture, we will consider how its anonymous author makes his case and ask whether and to what extent it is fair to consider this letter as an early instance of Christian anti-Semitism.

### Outline

- I. One of the most popular books outside of the New Testament in ancient times was the Letter of Barnabas.
  - A. It was so popular in parts of the Church that some Christian writers (such as Clement of Alexandria) quoted it as Scripture.
  - B. It is actually included as one of the books of the New Testament in our oldest surviving complete manuscript of the New Testament, Codex Sinaiticus.
  - C. In part, its popularity stemmed from its reputed author: Barnabas, the companion of the apostle Paul (see Acts 13–14).
  - D. The book itself is anonymous, however, and scholars today recognize that it was written decades after Barnabas's death.
  - E. It is probably a good thing that the book never made it into the New Testament: This is one of the most virulently anti-Jewish books from the first two centuries of Christianity.
- II. The overarching theme of the Letter of Barnabas is that Judaism is, and always has been, a false religion; that Jews have always misunderstood the Law of Moses God gave them; and that the Old Testament is, in fact, a Christian, not a Jewish, book.
  - A. After the introduction to the letter, the theme is stated in 2:4: God has no need of the Jewish sacrifices and has never wanted them.

1. One key to understanding the letter is that Barnabas draws this lesson from the pages of the Jewish Scriptures themselves (specifically, the prophets, who were interested themselves in the revival of the Jewish religion, not its abolition)!
  2. In other words, Barnabas uses Jewish Scripture to undermine the Jewish religion.
- B. This is a strikingly different approach to Scripture from that evidenced among other early Christian writers.
  1. Some early Christians, such as the Jewish-Christian Ebionites, had just the opposite view of Scripture: It was the only authoritative guide to faith and practice, to be adhered to closely by the followers of Jesus.
  2. Other early Christians, such as the apostle Paul, thought that the Scriptures had been fulfilled in Christ; its ritual laws were no longer a guide to how one was to live religiously.
  3. Still other early Christians, such as the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century teacher Marcion, thought that the Scriptures of the Jews were *only* for the Jews and were to have no bearing on the lives of Christians.
  4. Barnabas, in contrast to all these other positions, maintained that parts of the Scripture were literally to be accepted—those parts that condemned the Jews for their failure to worship God appropriately. But other parts—especially those that described how God wanted his people to live and worship—were to be taken figuratively.
  5. According to Barnabas, Jews had mistakenly taken God's Law given to Moses literally, when in fact, he intended the Law to be a figurative set of instructions about how to live.
- C. For Barnabas, the Jewish people, who had always misunderstood God's purpose and intentions, were not really God's people, members of the covenant.
  1. In Barnabas's view, when God gave his covenant to his people on Mount Sinai, they immediately broke it, as symbolized in Moses' smashing of the tablets of the Ten Commandments (4:6b–8).
  2. For that reason, Jews never had been people of the covenant.
  3. God's covenant is reserved for those who actually do what he wants, in believing in his messiah, Jesus, and keeping the figurative meaning of the laws given to Moses.

### III. Much of the Letter of Barnabas is devoted to showing how Jews misunderstood these laws, taking them literally when they were meant symbolically.

- A. This is seen in the law of circumcision, for example, which did not actually require Jews to cut the foreskins of their baby boys (as they were misled by an evil angel to believe) but was a symbolic statement of the need to believe in the cross of Jesus (ch. 9).

- B. This “misunderstanding” is also seen in the laws of kosher, which are not about what not to eat but how not to behave.
  - 1. Not eating pork means not behaving in the same manner as pigs, who are satisfied with their master (God) only when well fed (10:1–4).
  - 2. Not eating rabbit means not being sexually corrupt, like rabbits, who grow an additional orifice every year to increase their sexual appetite (10:6).
  - 3. Not eating the hyena means not being perverted, like hyenas, who alternate sex annually, one year being male and the next, female (10:7).
  - 4. Not eating the weasel means not engaging in illicit sexual activity, like weasels, who conceive their young through the mouth (10:8). And so on.
  - 5. On the other hand, the foods that are to be eaten are symbolic as well: Jews are to eat only animals that chew the cud and have split hooves. They are, in other words, to be those who meditate on God’s word (chewing the cud) and who are both upright in this world and anticipate the world to come (split hooves).
- C. The “misunderstanding” is further seen in other symbolic passages of Scripture, such as when the children of Israel won their battle with the Amalekites so long as Moses stood over them lifting his arms in the shape of a cross (ch. 12).
- D. It is seen in the law of the Sabbath, which does not give Jews license not to work one day of the week, but refers to the future 1,000-year reign of Christ, the millennium (ch. 15).

- IV. This is clearly a work that attacks the Jewish religion from a Christian perspective. But when was it written?
- A. The text indicates that the Temple lay in ruins and that there is an expectation that it will soon be rebuilt (16:3–4).
  - B. This means that it must have been written after A.D. 70, when the Jewish Temple was destroyed, and probably when the Temple was rebuilt by the Romans as a temple to Jupiter/Zeus around the year 130.
  - C. It may be that heightened Jewish-Christian tensions are what led to this vitriolic attack on all things Jewish.
  - D. To make sense of that context, we need to know more about the development of Christianity away from being a Jewish sect to becoming an anti-Jewish religion, which will be the subject of our next lecture.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “The Epistle of Barnabas,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, pp. 3–83.

Clayton Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp. 11–31.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

Reidar Hvalvik, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant: The Purpose of the Epistle of Barnabas*.

James Carleton Paget, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. In your experience, how do Christians today deal with the fact that the Old Testament is still considered part of sacred Scripture, yet Christians do not think that they need to follow the laws that the Old Testament prescribes?
2. In your opinion, is it possible to be strongly opposed to all things Jewish, as is Barnabas, without being in danger of being anti-Semitic?

# Lecture Fourteen

## The Rise of Christian Anti-Semitism

**Scope:** The anti-Jewish stance of the Letter of Barnabas leads us to consider more broadly one of the key questions surrounding early Christianity. It is widely acknowledged by scholars today that Christianity began with the preaching of Jesus, who was himself thoroughly and ineluctably Jewish; yet within a century, many of his followers were avidly opposed to all things Jewish. How could this be? How is it that Christianity was so quickly transformed from a sect within Judaism to an anti-Jewish religion?

This is the question we will address in this lecture, as we trace the roots of anti-Jewish attitudes among some of Jesus' early followers, some of them well known, such as the apostle Paul and the writer of Matthew, and some of them less known but equally important, such as the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century bishop of Sardis, Melito.

### Outline

- I. The Letter of Barnabas raises a set of important questions about the relationships between Christians and Jews in antiquity.
  - A. As we saw in the previous lecture, Barnabas is opposed to the Jewish religion.
    1. He maintains that Jews broke the covenant God had made with them as soon as it was given and that it was never restored.
    2. As a result, they were misled by an evil angel into thinking that their laws were to be taken literally instead of figuratively.
    3. For this reason, they have never worshiped God in a way appropriate to him.
    4. It is the Christians, the followers of Jesus, who correctly understand the Law of Moses and do what it requires. Jews are not, therefore, the true people of God.
  - B. One might wonder why Barnabas is so obsessed with showing that Christians, rather than Jews, are the true people of God.
    1. Ultimately, the answer has to do with Christianity's own historical root because the Christian religion started out as a sect of Jews.
    2. Jesus himself was a Jew, as were his 12 disciples.
    3. After his death, these Jewish followers formed a distinctive sect within Judaism and still considered themselves to be Jews.
  - C. Thus, one of the most salient questions for historians of antiquity is: How is it that a Jewish sect became an avidly anti-Jewish religion, all within a century?

- II.** To answer the question, we need to return to the beginnings of Christianity in the life and ministry of Jesus.
- A. There is an enormous range of scholarly opinion today about how to understand the life of Jesus and how to know what he actually said and did.
  - B. The one thing virtually all scholars are agreed on, however, is that however Jesus is to be understood, he must be understood as a 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jew living in Palestine.
    - 1. Jesus was born Jewish and raised Jewish. He followed Jewish customs, kept the Jewish Law, became a Jewish teacher, and acquired Jewish followers, whom he taught his own vision of what it meant to be an observant Jew, one who truly kept the Law God had given the Jewish people through Moses.
    - 2. Throughout his lifetime, Jesus preached his message to Jews, and at the end of his life, he was executed by the Romans for claiming to be the Jewish king.
    - 3. From beginning to end, Jesus was thoroughly and ineluctably Jewish.
  - C. So, too, were his earliest followers, who continued to keep his instructions about the Law and continued, according to our earliest records, to worship in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.
- III.** Even decades after his death, many of Jesus' followers continued to insist that in following Jesus, they had found the secret to keeping the Jewish Law and observing the Jewish religion in the way that the Jewish God wanted them to.
- A. This can be seen, for example, in one of our later Gospels, Matthew, written about 50 years after Jesus' death.
  - B. Above all, Matthew is concerned to show that Jesus is the Jewish messiah sent from the Jewish God to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures.
  - C. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus continually emphasizes the need to observe the Jewish Law (for example, 5:17–20).
  - D. It would be a mistake to think that Matthew didn't really mean this. The followers of Jesus, for Matthew, were to be good Jews.
- IV.** Other influential early Christians, however, had other ideas, especially the apostle Paul.
- A. Paul himself started out as a religious Jew, who was, in fact, opposed to Christians who claimed that Jesus was the messiah.
  - B. For Paul, originally, Jesus could *not* be the messiah of God, because rather than being God's chosen one, he obviously stood under God's curse. He was, after all, crucified!

- C. But in one of the greatest turnarounds in history, Paul experienced a conversion, in which he came to see that Jesus really was the Son of God and that his death was not God's condemnation of Jesus but God's way of making his righteous one pay for the sins of others.
  - D. Paul, then, became an outspoken proponent of faith in Jesus. But this had implications for his understanding of his former Judaism.
    - 1. Because faith in Jesus was the way to have a right standing before God, the Law of Moses was of no value in making one right before God.
    - 2. The salvation of Jesus was for all people, Jew and Gentile. And keeping the Law could not assist in bringing salvation.
    - 3. The Jewish religion, therefore, had been transcended, and salvation now came to those who had faith in Christ.
  - E. Paul had opponents who thought otherwise, for example, enemies in the region of Galatia who maintained that following Christ required one to follow the Law as well.
    - 1. Paul castigated such views as dangerous and anti-Christian.
    - 2. But were his opponents people who held to a view more like Matthew's?
- V. In the struggles that ensued within Christian circles, Paul's views eventually won out.
- A. By the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, most converts to the new religion were pagans, not Jews.
  - B. In part, this was because the Christian message about Jesus never did make sense to most Jews, who saw Jesus not as the promised, powerful messiah but as a weak, crucified criminal.
  - C. But even within most Gentile circles of Christianity, there continued to be an emphasis on the need to retain the Old Testament as Scripture, even if keeping its laws could not in itself bring salvation.
    - 1. In part, this was because of the staying power of the tradition that Jesus and his followers were all faithful Jews.
    - 2. But there was another reason for Christians to hold on to their Jewish roots: Without them, Christianity could appear to be a novelty, an innovation; in the ancient world, "new" philosophies and religions were always seen as suspect and not credible.
    - 3. Possibly to gain credibility in the world at large, or even to prevent their own persecution, Christians claimed that they were the true heirs of the ancient religion of Judaism.
    - 4. But what was one to do about the fact that Jews were still around and were more naturally thought to be the heirs of their own religion?
    - 5. Christians were almost forced by the logic of their own position to go on the attack against non-Christian Jews, to show that they

were actually apostates from the Jewish religion and that it was Christianity, not Judaism, that was the legitimate heir to the ancient traditions of Israel.

- VI.** That is the context within which the Letter of Barnabas and other 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Christian anti-Jewish literature was written.
- A. Some 2<sup>nd</sup>-century writers, such as Justin Martyr, were quite unforgiving toward Jews, saying, for example, that the mark of circumcision was given by God to mark Jews for persecution.
  - B. Others, such as Melito of Sardis, were even more vitriolic, claiming that because Jesus was divine and because the Jewish people were responsible for his death, the Jews had killed their own God.
  - C. Eventually, of course, this led to a history of anti-Semitism, of hatred and violence against the Jews, ironically, by a Christian religion that itself started out as a sect within Judaism.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, pp. 95–130.

Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*.

Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (135–425)*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. In your opinion, is it possible to believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of Judaism *without*, at least indirectly, casting aspersions on the Jewish religion as it has come down through the centuries?
2. In your experience, how much of modern anti-Semitism can be traced to Christian influences? Does it seem ironic that a religion that urges love of all people should have a history of such hatred toward Jews, especially given that the religion started off as Jewish?

## Lecture Fifteen

# 2 Clement—An Early Sermon

**Scope:** One of the lesser-known works of the Apostolic Fathers is a book traditionally called the letter of 2 Clement. The title is a misnomer: The book was not written by Clement, the bishop of Rome, and it is not even a letter. It is, instead, an anonymous sermon. As such, it is the first surviving sermon to come down to us from early Christianity (outside of the New Testament).

The topic of the sermon has to do with the joy of salvation that has been graciously granted to Christians through the merciful act of God in Christ. It prompts Christians to be thankful for what they have received as believers and urges them to exhibit appropriate ethical behavior in response. The sermon is based on an interpretation of certain key texts of the “Old” Testament. In this lecture, we will consider the main themes of this sermon and the nature of its exposition of scriptural passages in order to make its points.

### Outline

- I. Probably the least known and the most under-studied book of the Apostolic Fathers is the so-called letter of 2 Clement.
  - A. The title of the book is a misnomer.
    - 1. It was not written by the author of 1 Clement or by Clement of Rome in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century.
    - 2. And it is not even a letter; it appears, instead, to be a sermon delivered by some anonymous preacher, then written down for broader circulation.
  - B. It was discovered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the same manuscript that contains 1 Clement, which was published in 1633.
  - C. It is a very difficult document to date, because there are no references to datable events in the text and we don’t know who wrote it. Based on its theological perspective, scholars have tended to date it to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century, possibly in the 140s—some 50 years after 1 Clement was written by a different author.
  - D. Despite its relative unpopularity, it is an interesting book and worth some sustained reflection.
- II. Even a quick read through the book shows that it is probably best understood as a sermon that was originally delivered orally.
  - A. This can be seen in the author’s comments in 19:1.
  - B. Its genre is significant: This is the first Christian sermon from outside the New Testament to survive from Christian antiquity.

1. There are several sermons found in the New Testament, for example, in the book of Acts (chs. 2, 3, 15, for instance).
  2. And some scholars think that the book of Hebrews originated as a sermon.
  3. But, as we will see, 2 Clement is significant because it gives clues as to how the Christians' worship services, in which the sermon was given, were conducted.
- C. It appears that the audience of the sermon was comprised of Christians who had been converted from paganism (cf. 1:6).

- III.** The sermon involves an exposition of Scripture and exhortation to appropriate behavior.
- A. The theme of the sermon is stated at the outset (1:1–2).
  - B. The author elaborates his theme through an exposition of a passage of Scripture, using a figurative mode of interpretation (2:1–3).
    1. It is clear that the “Old” Testament is taken as an authoritative text.
    2. However, it is not the historical, literal meaning of the text that matters, but its figurative application to the congregation in the present.
    3. In the next lecture, we will deal with this mode of scriptural interpretation at length, as it is both interesting and widespread in early Judaism and Christianity.
  - C. It is striking, though, that not only the Old Testament but the teachings of Jesus are treated as “Scripture” (2:4).
    1. It looks as if 2 Clement is well on the way to accepting a *bipartite canon* of “Old” Testament and “New” Testament, both equally authoritative.
    2. The quotations of Jesus, though, may not all come from books: Some may have come to the author through the oral tradition.
    3. Some of these quotations are familiar to students of the New Testament (for example, 4:1–2; cf. Matthew 7:21; 9:10–11; cf. Matthew 12:50).
    4. Others, however, do not have a precise parallel in any other known account of Jesus’ words (cf. 4:5).
  - D. Some of the unusual sayings of Jesus that form the basis for the book’s exposition appear to derive from Gospels that did not make it into the New Testament.
    1. The saying of 5:2–4, for example, appears to be from the lost Gospel of Peter.
    2. And the saying of 12:1–2 appears to come from the Coptic Gospel of Thomas.

- IV.** All of the authorities quoted—Old Testament Scriptures and sayings of Jesus—are used for the purposes of exhortation.
  - A.** This can be seen even in the sayings of Jesus that derive from non-canonical sources (for example, 12:3–6).
  - B.** And it appears to be the point of the entire sermon (cf. 17:1, 3).
- V.** Thus, it becomes clear from 2 Clement how the worship service of this community was constructed.
  - A.** There was a reading from Old Testament Scripture (Isaiah 54:1).
  - B.** This was the basis for reflection and exposition, as the text was explained.
  - C.** This exposition was then the basis of moral exhortation.
  - D.** It is possible, as well, that hymns were sung during the services, as seen from other evidence from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
- VI.** In sum, 2 Clement is a significant book, in part because it can reveal to us what worship services were like in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century; as it turns out, they were probably not all that different from Christian worship services in our own time.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “Second Letter of Clement,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 154–199.

Clayton Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp.117–133.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

Karl Donfried, *The Setting of Second Clement in Early Christianity*.

Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *From Prophecy to Preaching: A Search for the Origins of the Christian Homily*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. If you have ever had any experiences in worship services today, how were they like and unlike those attested to by 2 Clement?
2. Given the range of authorities cited by 2 Clement, what do you suppose we can say about the formation of the canon of Scripture for Christians in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century: Was the collection of books into a set canon completed yet?

## Lecture Sixteen

# The Use of Scripture in the Early Church

**Scope:** The fact that Scripture is so central to the exposition of 2 Clement allows us to consider further the question of how Scripture functioned for the early Christian communities. Much of that sermon is based on a creative reading of a particular passage in the Old Testament, Isaiah 54:1, a passage that at first glance seems to have nothing to do with the situation addressed by 2 Clement. But by using an allegorical mode of interpretation, the preacher is able to make the words of the text applicable to his congregation's own situation.

In this lecture, we will see that this was not an unusual approach to Scripture among early Christians. Rather than taking a literal approach to the text, they often read the text figuratively. In this, they were following accepted interpretive practices of Judaism. Eventually, however, the practice of allegorical reading among Christians came under fire, as Christian leaders began to realize that if a text can be taken to mean something other than it literally says, it could be used to support “false” teachings as well as true ones.

### Outline

- I. In our last lecture, we saw how Scripture played an important role in the worship services presupposed by 2 Clement.
  - A. The Old Testament was not interpreted literally, however, but figuratively, to show its relevance in the here and now for the congregation of Christians.
  - B. We might call this a *presentist* mode of interpretation, one in which the text is taken out of its own historical context and made to apply to a present situation—even if that present situation is quite different from the one to which the text was originally addressed.
  - C. Thus, the exposition of Isaiah 54:1 in 2 Clement applies not to Israel in the Babylonian exile but to Christians in the Roman world.
  - D. This kind of presentist interpretation of Scripture has always been popular among Christians and is still found widely today, as seen, for example, in the scriptural expositions of “prophecy experts” who claim that the predictions of Scripture are coming true in the here and now (e.g., Edgar Whisenant on Matthew 24 ).
    - 1. Edgar Whisenant published a book (*88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988*) prophesying the “rapture” or Second Coming of Christ would occur in 1988.

2. One of the reasons many found this a convincing idea was Whisenant's interpretation of the parable of the fig tree, found in Matthew 24.
  3. Whisenant pointed out that in Scripture the fig tree symbolizes Israel. He interpreted the parabolic image of the fig tree sprouting leaves as the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948. To this he added his interpretation of the parable's words "This generation shall not pass till all these things be done" to mean that the rapture would happen in 40 years, or one Biblical generation, from the founding of Israel in 1948.
- II. There is a long history of this mode of interpretation among both Jewish and Christian interpreters.
- A. Around the time of the beginning of Christianity, this approach to interpretation was prevalent among the Jewish community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls.
    1. Scholars believe the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947, were written by Essenes, apocalyptic Jewish Christians, who believed the end of the world was imminent; God would soon intervene to overthrow the forces of evil (i.e. the Romans), and they, the Essenes, would be given the kingdom of Israel.
    2. There are a variety of kinds of writings found among the scrolls discovered beginning in 1947: Scripture texts, rules for the community's life together, books of psalms, and most important for our purposes here, examples of scriptural interpretation.
    3. Among the latter are commentaries on Scripture, such as the famous Commentary on Habakkuk, which applies a mode of interpretation called *pesher*—in effect, a simple presentist form of interpreting the text.
  - B. We find similar modes of interpretation among the early Christians.
    1. Something similar happens in Matthew's interpretation of the life of Jesus (for example, Matthew 2:15).
    2. Another presentist interpretation appears in 2 Clement in response to the Gnostic idea of a fragmented material world separated from the divine world. The Gnostics worked toward unifying the two worlds into a future world in which spirit and body would be one and male would not be distinguished from female. The author of 2 Clement interprets the symbolic Gnostic words "two become one" to mean "when we speak truth to one another—when we agree." The Gnostic "outside like inside" is interpreted in 2 Clement to mean that the soul should be visible through good works. The Gnostic "male and female are neither male nor female" is interpreted to mean that males and females will be equals in society.

- 3. An even more obvious example occurs in the apostle Paul's interpretation of the book of Genesis, in which he allegorizes the partners of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar (Gal. 2:21–31).
  - C. We can see similar approaches to interpretation in writings of other church fathers. Recall the interpretations of the laws of circumcision and *kashrut* in Barnabas, for example.
- III.** Eventually, this mode of interpretation ran into problems in proto-orthodox Christian circles.
- A. One problem is that if a text doesn't mean what it literally says, but means something else instead, it is difficult to control the meaning of the text, allowing interpreters to make the text mean anything they want it to mean.
  - B. This became a problem because certain "heretical" groups could appeal to Scripture in support of their views, even when those views were not literally taught in Scripture.
    - 1. For example, Gnostics believed that there were 30 gods in the divine realm; Gnostic interpreters claimed that the fact that Jesus was baptized when he was 30 supported this view.
    - 2. Further, Gnostics held that the 12<sup>th</sup> deity of the final group of 12 "fell" from the divine realm, leading to the creation of this world; this was "seen" in the fact that Jesus' 12<sup>th</sup> disciple, Judas Iscariot, was the one who betrayed him.
    - 3. The dove that descended upon Jesus was interpreted to mean that at that point, a divine being came into the man Jesus to empower him for his ministry before leaving him prior to his death; this was based on the fact that the letters in the Greek word for "dove" have the same numerical value as alpha and omega, the number of God.
  - C. Proto-orthodox Christians opposed these interpretations by claiming they had no ties to the literal meaning of the text.
    - 1. The father Irenaeus, in particular, asserted that Gnostic interpreters were like someone who took a beautiful mosaic of a king and rearranged the stones into the shape of a mongrel, claiming that that image was what the artist intended all along.
    - 2. But in some ways, the proto-orthodox interpretations of texts were no less bizarre and unrelated to the literal meaning than those of the Gnostics.
    - 3. The difference—at least according to the proto-orthodox Christians—was that they derived their doctrines from the clear meaning of Scripture (meaning a literal interpretation) and their figurative interpretations were valid only insofar as they did not contradict these literal meanings.
    - 4. It is for that reason that the literal meaning of Scripture has often been given the greatest priority in interpreting the text.

**IV.** It is important to realize that texts don't provide their own interpretations.

- A. Interpreters are the ones who instill meaning in texts.
- B. And interpreters all have different ways of looking at and understanding the world.
- C. These different perspectives affect how texts are read.
- D. That was just as true in antiquity as it is today, as can be seen, for example, in the interpretations of Scripture advanced by the book of 2 Clement.

**Essential Reading:**

Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*.

Robert Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Peter R. Akroyd, ed. *Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1.

R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Do you think that texts have "common sense" interpretations? If so, why do so many otherwise intelligent people disagree about how to interpret texts, such as those of the New Testament? Is it just that some people are smarter than others?
2. In your opinion, should the texts of Scripture be interpreted in just the same way as all other texts are interpreted (such as novels, short stories, and newspaper articles), or should there be "special" rules? If there are special rules, who gets to decide the rules, and how would you know if they are right?

## Lecture Seventeen

# Papias—An Early Christian Interpreter

**Scope:** The questions of interpretation dealt with in the previous lecture make a natural segue into the fragmentary writings of another Apostolic Father, Papias. Unfortunately, we do not have Papias's writings preserved for us completely but only in small snippets as they were quoted for us in later authors. However, what we know about Papias is significant: He wrote one of the earliest detailed commentaries on the sayings of Jesus, called *An Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*.

The quotations from this work that we still have are very interesting, because they contain a number of legendary details both about what Jesus taught—for example, about the coming millennial age—and about his followers—for example, about the fate of Judas Iscariot.

### Outline

- I. One of the most interesting but least known Apostolic Fathers was Papias, an enigmatic figure of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
  - A. Unfortunately, the writings of Papias have come down to us only in snippets.
    1. With the other Apostolic Fathers, we actually have manuscripts of their writings, completely preserved.
    2. The writings of Papias, on the other hand, were not preserved. We know of them only insofar as small portions of them were quoted by later church fathers.
  - B. At one time, however, Papias's works were recognized as significant. He was the first known author to collect the sayings of Jesus and provide an extended interpretation of them.
    1. His lost work was in five volumes and was called *An Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*.
    2. Given its length, Papias obviously collected a lot of material not found in the Gospels of the New Testament.
    3. We are fortunate that he tells us what his sources of information were: Principally they were the companions of the apostles themselves, whom Papias had met and interviewed for information about what Jesus' apostles had said about him (fragment 3.3).
  - C. The traditions we have about Papias indicate that he was a companion of Polycarp's and, along with Polycarp, had actually been a disciple of John, the son of Zebedee.
    1. Later traditions indicate that he was John's secretary (fragment 15); however, this appears to be a legend.

2. What we can say about him is that he appears to have been a generation removed from the companions of Jesus' disciples; he seems to have been active around A.D. 110–130.
  3. The connections these later legends make from Papias and Polycarp to John appear to be part of the attempt by later orthodox writers to trace the line of apostolic succession from the days of Jesus down to their own time.
- II. In large measure because of his quirky views, Papias came to be regarded as suspicious by later authors.
  - A. In particular, it was his literal interpretation of the future millennium that led to his falling out of favor with the later representatives of orthodoxy.
  - B. From the earliest of times, Christians had maintained an apocalyptic worldview, starting with Jesus himself, who proclaimed the coming of a future kingdom of God to Earth.
    1. The kingdom of God for Jesus was not “heaven” in the world above: It appears to have been a real kingdom, here on Earth, that would be ruled over by earthly rulers (the 12 disciples) and headed by the future messiah.
    2. This kingdom was expected to replace the wicked kingdoms of Earth.
    3. In making this proclamation, Jesus was standing in a long line of prophets who predicted that God would eventually reassert his control over this world.
    4. Expectations of what this would be like go all the way back to the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament, such as Isaiah (cf. Isa. 11:1–9).
    5. Jesus, though, had a more apocalyptic vision of what this future kingdom would be like: He anticipated that it would involve not just a good kingdom on Earth but the overthrow of the forces of evil with the arrival of the Son of Man (cf. Mark 8:38–9:1; Mark 13:24–31).
  - C. Jesus' preaching of the future kingdom was taken up by his followers, as can be seen from the writings of the apostle Paul.
    1. Paul expected that it would be Jesus himself who would return from heaven in judgment on the Earth.
    2. And Paul anticipated that he himself would be alive to see this cataclysmic event take place (1 Thessalonians 4:14–18; 1 Corinthians 15:51–53).
  - D. Papias, two generations later, continued to subscribe to this kind of apocalyptic vision, literally anticipating a future paradise here on Earth (fragment 1:2).

- E. Later church fathers found this view, which they called *chiliasm*, to be far too literalistic and naïve.
  - 1. Instead, there developed the idea that the kingdom of God was not to be taken literally as an event that would take place on Earth.
  - 2. The kingdom of God increasingly was taken as a metaphor for God's rule over his people, both here on Earth and in heaven after death.
  - 3. It is probably because of his literalistic interpretations that Papias was castigated by later writers, such as Eusebius, the father of Church history, who called Papias "a man of exceedingly small intelligence" (*Church History* 3.39).

- III. It is interesting to observe that the apocalyptic vision of Jesus and his earlier followers came to be transformed in later generations.
  - A. In part, this transformation resulted from the "failure" of the end to appear.
  - B. We can see the beginnings of that transformation already among some of Paul's congregations, for example, the Christians in the church of Corinth.
  - C. Paul's avid opposition to their views came to be embodied in the New Testament, but ironically, his perspective ended up not carrying the day.
  - D. Today, the vast majority of Christians think of the kingdom of God as the experience of God's rule in the here and now and in the afterlife, rather than as a literal kingdom here on Earth.
- IV. In sum, Papias was faithful to the earliest Christian tradition about the coming of the end, and it was because he failed to adjust that vision with the passage of time that he ended up being regarded as a naïve and unsophisticated thinker, even though he was one of the first to collect the sayings of Jesus and interpret them according to the teachings of Jesus' own followers.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., "Fragments of Papias," in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, pp. 86–119.

William R. Schoedel, "Papias," in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, D. N. Freedman, ed., vol. 5, pp. 140–142.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

William R. Schoedel, "Papias," in the series *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, pp. 235–270.

William R. Schoedel, "Fragments of Papias," in *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation*, Robert M. Grant, ed., vol. 5.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. There continue to be people today, of course, who still expect the end of this world to happen soon. How are such people widely viewed, and why are they viewed in this way?
2. In your opinion, could Jesus and Paul really have expected the end of the age to come within their own generation? Were they wrong?

# Lecture Eighteen

## Oral Tradition in Early Christianity

**Scope:** One of the most striking features of Papias's writings is that he claims to prefer learning about Jesus from companions of his disciples rather than from the books that had been written about him (that is, the Gospels). For Papias, it was better to have a living, breathing authority for a tradition about Jesus than a book, principally because the living authority could be questioned.

In this lecture, we will consider this issue of oral tradition versus written text. Included in our discussion will be the problem of the oral circulation of traditions—because stories tend to be changed and even made up in the process of retelling. To what extent did that happen with the traditions about Jesus, given that they were in oral circulation among Christian communities for decades before they were written down in the Gospels?

### Outline

- I. One of the interesting things we learned about Papias in the preceding lecture was that he showed a distinct preference for oral over written traditions about Jesus (fragment 3: 3–4).
  - A. This preference stands at odds with modern sensitivities.
    1. People today tend to distrust oral traditions as “hearsay” and prefer to have written documentation for events of the past.
    2. But in antiquity, oral sources were widely regarded as being superior to written, because they could be questioned and probed for additional clarification.
    3. This preference for oral over written communication had a strong philosophical basis, from the time of Plato up to the Gnostics.
  - B. Eventually within Christianity, the written word came to play a more important role than spoken tradition—at least among “official” representatives of “orthodox” theology.
    1. This was precisely because the written word, in theory, was established and secure.
    2. Moreover, the “ancient” written records could be trusted to set forth the more ancient views, of Jesus and his apostles, unchanged with the passing of time.
  - C. Even so, in the earliest periods of Christianity, oral tradition played a vital role in the religion.
    1. This can be seen in some of the comments made by the apostle Paul in the years before there were any written accounts of Jesus' words and deeds (cf. 1 Cor. 11:22–24; 1 Cor. 15:3–5).

2. It can also be seen in the claims of one of the Gospel writers, Luke (Luke 1:1–4).
  - D. Modern scholars are convinced that the fact that the traditions about Jesus circulated orally for so long before being written down played an important role in how they came to be changed over time.
    1. It is important to remember that the Gospels of the New Testament were written 35–65 years after Jesus had died.
    2. The authors of these Gospels relied on traditions they had *heard* about Jesus in producing their accounts.
    3. Naturally, traditions passed along orally change in transmission (cf. the children's game "telephone").
    4. In oral cultures, it was not thought that traditions should remain the same with each retelling; quite the contrary, traditions were to be modified according to the audience and the circumstances of the retelling.
    5. The concern for verbatim accuracy only came into being with the advent of written culture; this was not a dominant concern before accuracy could be verified.
- II. Traditions about Jesus continued to circulate orally and, in that process, came to be changed, even after the Gospels were written, as can be seen in the traditions found in Papias's book, *An Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*.
- A. There is, for example, a striking tradition about the death of Judas.
    1. The New Testament accounts of Judas's death show evidence of modification over time; there are similarities but irreconcilable differences between the two accounts we have (Matthew 27 and Acts 1).
    2. Papias's account is different still and even more gory (fragment 4).
    3. Later authors tried to reconcile all of these by conflating the versions together (fragment 4:1).
  - B. In addition, there is an oral tradition in Papias about the writers of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark (fragment 3:15), although there is some question about whether he is referring to *our* Gospels of Matthew and Mark.
- III. Oral traditions about Jesus also came to be embodied in yet later written accounts.
- A. This can be seen, for example, in the stories of Jesus' youth in the so-called Infancy Gospel of Thomas.
  - B. It can also be seen in the stories of Jesus' Passion in the Gospel of Peter.
- IV. In short, as the fragments of Papias show, oral tradition played an enormously important role in early Christianity, both before and after the

accounts of Jesus' life were written down by the anonymous authors of our New Testament Gospels.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, chapter 3.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed., *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, pp. 116–142.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

William R. Schoedel, “Papias,” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, D. N. Freedman, ed., vol. 5, pp. 140–142.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. What do you see as the benefits and difficulties of using oral traditions to reconstruct the events of the fairly recent past, for example, the events of the Second World War?
2. Have you ever experienced an instance in which something you did or experienced came to be changed as it was told by someone else later?

# Lecture Nineteen

## The Shepherd of Hermas— An Apocalypse

**Scope:** One of the most popular writings among the Apostolic Fathers is called The Shepherd, written by a man named Hermas. It is a very long book—longer than any book of the New Testament. In it, the writer narrates a number of visions that inform him about the nature of the Christian Church, its current plight, and its imminent struggles. These visions are invariably interpreted to the author by an angelic companion who has taken the form of a shepherd; hence, the title of the book.

In this lecture, we will consider the overarching themes of the work and its salient message, in particular, a theme that runs throughout its long narrative: the question of whether a Christian can have a “second” chance with God if he or she sins after being baptized. The answer The Shepherd’s visions give is clear: A Christian has a second chance to return to God, but no more.

### Outline

- I. In the early centuries of Christianity, one of the most popular writings of the Apostolic Fathers was The Shepherd of Hermas.
  - A. This is far and away the longest writing of the Apostolic Fathers and is much longer than any book that made it into the New Testament.
  - B. The book records a series of visions given to a Christian prophet named Hermas.
    - 1. There have been long debates over who this Hermas actually was.
    - 2. Some indication of Hermas’ identity is given in the anonymous pamphlet called the Muratorian Canon, a fragmentary text discovered in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
    - 3. The author of the Muratorian Canon translated into Latin an earlier original written in Greek. Most scholars think the anonymous author of the original Greek text was writing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century around or in Rome.
    - 4. The Muratorian Canon lists a 24-book canon and confirms 22 of the 27 canonical books of the New Testament as being canonical. The author names some books that he feels should be excluded because of heresy and mentions others that he feels are acceptable, but should, nevertheless, not be included in the canon of Scripture. The Shepherd is one of these because it is not an ancient book whose author was connected with one of the apostles.
    - 5. The Muratorian Canon also indicates that Hermas was the brother of the bishop of Rome, Pius (r. A.D. 140–154).

6. Somewhat later, the church father Origen indicated that Hermas was none other than the companion of the apostle Paul, mentioned in Romans 16:14.
  7. It is difficult for us to know who, in fact, Hermas was, other than that he appears to have been an early-2<sup>nd</sup>-century Christian author.
- C. His book is called *The Shepherd* because the visions that he receives are interpreted for him, for the most part, by an angelic figure who comes to him in the guise of a shepherd.
- D. The book is best understood as an *apocalypse*.
1. Apocalypses were a popular genre among Jews and Christians in the first two centuries A.D., even though the only one most people today know about is the Apocalypse of John.
  2. But we have numerous surviving examples from antiquity, which we will explore more fully in the next lecture.
  3. For our purposes here, it is enough to give a simple definition of the genre: An apocalypse is a book that records visions given to an earthly prophet, usually interpreted by a heavenly messenger, containing a number of bizarre and deeply symbolic images that convey heavenly truths to explain earthly realities. An apocalypse is meant to answer such questions as: Why is there suffering in the world? Why are the righteous persecuted? What can be expected to happen in the future of the world?
  4. The Shepherd is considered part of sacred scripture and included as part of the New Testament in the Codex Sinaiticus, discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai.

## II. The Shepherd of Hermas divides itself into three major sections.

- A. It begins with a section of 5 “visions.”
1. These represent a series of revelations given to Hermas that are meant to instruct him concerning life in this world, especially as it relates to sins against God and the need to repent.
  2. Some of the visions contain more than one revelation.
  3. In the fifth vision, The Shepherd himself appears to Hermas, and he will be the interpreter for the rest of the book.
- B. There follows a section of 10 “commandments.”
1. These are ethical injunctions concerning how to live for God.
  2. They are not just a list of dos and don’ts; some involve visions that come to be interpreted by The Shepherd.
- C. The book ends with the longest section of 12 “parables.”
1. These, too, are symbolic visions of the author, which are interpreted by The Shepherd.
  2. By and large, they concern the Christian Church, its makeup, its problems, and its need to stay faithful to God.

- D. As can be seen, these three sections are not completely distinct from one another.
1. There are visions and commandments in each of them, for example.
  2. And the longest parable (the ninth) is actually a prolonged exposition of one of the visions (the third) that has to do with a tower that the prophet sees being built out of a variety of stones, which is actually the Church being constructed out of a variety of different kinds of people.

III. To get an idea about the nature of the book, it is perhaps easiest simply to work through the first section, the five visions, to see what the overarching concerns of the author are.

- A. The first vision appears to record an autobiographical recollection.
  1. Hermas, a former slave, sees his former mistress, Rhoda, bathing in the Tiber River, and admires her beauty (ch. 1).
  2. He then has a vision of her looking down on him from heaven, accusing him for his impure thoughts (which comes as a surprise to him, because he was not conscious of having any; ch. 2).
  3. This leads him to self-reflection and repentance for his sins against God (chs. 2–3).
- B. In the second vision, Hermas sees an elderly woman reading a book (ch. 5).
  1. The book contains an account of the sins of his family against God (ch. 6).
  2. An important note is sounded in the vision: There is not much time left for people to repent (ch. 6).
- C. In the third vision, Hermas first sees the elderly woman again (ch. 9).
  1. He is allowed to sit only on her left hand, because her right is reserved for those who have suffered for the faith (ch. 9).
  2. He then sees a tower being built out of a variety of stones by six young men (ch. 10).
  3. The tower, it turns out, is the Church, which is also what the elderly woman represents (ch. 11).
  4. The builders of the Church are angels (ch. 12), and the stones are different kinds of persons who either join the Church or come to be excluded from it because of their sins (chs. 13–14).
- D. In the fourth vision, Hermas sees a terrifying monster that he passes by (ch. 22).
  1. The monster represents a coming time of tribulation for the Church (ch. 23).
  2. Only by remaining faithful to God can Christians survive this coming onslaught (ch. 24).

- E. In the fifth vision, The Shepherd comes to Hermas and announces his plans to stay with him and give him commandments from God.

#### **IV. The Shepherd of Hermas** is a very long book with some very basic themes.

- A. The visions are meant to be heavenly revelations that provide instruction for Christians living here on Earth.
- B. The overarching message is that they need to be faithful to God and repent of their sins.
- C. Those who refuse to do so will be removed from the Church and will suffer the consequences when the end comes, which will be very soon.

#### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “The Shepherd of Hermas,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 162–473.

Clayton Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp.134–158.

#### **Supplementary Reading:**

James Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome: Social Order and Hierarchy in Early Christianity*.

J. Christian Wilson, *Five Problems in the Interpretation of the Shepherd of Hermas*.

#### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Can you think of any reasons why The Shepherd of Hermas might have been eventually excluded from the canon, even though a number of early Christians considered it scriptural?
2. From what you’ve gathered from this lecture, is there information in The Shepherd that might help us understand the struggles Christians were having at the time of its writing?

# Lecture Twenty

## Apocalypses in Early Christianity

**Scope:** The Shepherd of Hermas is thoroughly imbued in apocalyptic thought; this gives us an opportunity to consider the importance of apocalypticism for the early Christian movement. In this lecture, we will consider the major tenets of apocalypticism, as found in both Jewish and Christian sources; we will see how Jesus himself proclaimed an apocalyptic message; and we will note how this apocalyptic view of the world both continued in the preaching of Jesus' followers (such as Paul and the author of Revelation) and came to be modified as Christians realized that the apocalyptic expectation of the imminent end of the world had not transpired and probably would not transpire. This "failure of the end" forced Christians to reconsider some of the basic aspects of their proclamation, away from an anticipation of an imminent end to a determination to accommodate to a world that was to be here for the long haul.

### Outline

- I. We saw in the preceding lecture that The Shepherd of Hermas is an example of an early Christian apocalypse.
  - A. Apocalypses were a common genre in early Christianity and Judaism.
  - B. Their basic function was to explain earthly realities through visions of heavenly truths.
  - C. In this lecture, we will explore more fully what the genre entailed and consider a couple of other examples.
- II. It is important to differentiate the genre *apocalypse* from the worldview called *apocalypticism*.
  - A. *Apocalypticism* was a worldview widely shared among Jews and Christians around the beginning of the Christian era.
    - 1. Apocalypticists were dualists who maintained that the current evil age was soon to be overthrown by God, who would bring in his good kingdom in the near future.
    - 2. There were many apocalypticists—for example, Jesus and Paul—who never wrote an apocalypse.
  - B. The term *apocalypse* refers to a specific genre of revelatory literature that conveys an apocalyptic message.
  - C. These *revelations* could be of two different types.
    - 1. Some apocalypses contain visions of the future of the Earth (usually in highly symbolic language); this is the *historical* type.

2. The earliest example of a historical apocalypse is the book of Daniel, which contains a number of visions.
3. In Daniel 7, for example, Daniel has a symbolic vision of horrible beasts that take over the earth, but are destroyed by the Son of Man. An angelic interpreter tells Daniel that the four beasts represent the four kingdoms of the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks. The ten horns on the fourth beast represent the ten kings of the Seleucid Empire. The Son of Man represents the saints of the Most High, who will inherit the Earth, when God brings his kingdom to his saints and earthly kingdoms are destroyed.
4. Other apocalypses contain visions of the heavenly realm (again, in symbolic language). Here, the idea is that what happens on Earth is a reflection of what happens in heaven; this is the *heavenly vision* type.
5. Some apocalypses combine the two types, as happens, for example, in the New Testament book of Revelation, where the visionary, John, sees the heavenly realm and has explained to him the future course of what will happen on Earth.

**III.** A number of specific features can be found in most apocalypses (not all apocalypses have all these features, but most have most of them).

- A. Most apocalypses are pseudonymous, written in the names of famous religious persons of the past.
  1. We have apocalypses written in the names of Peter, Enoch, and even Adam!
  2. The ploy of pseudonymity was particularly useful for the historical type of apocalypse, because the “future” predictions were, in fact, already past at the time of writing.
  3. As it turns out, both The Shepherd and the Apocalypse of John do not share this particular feature of most apocalypses.
- B. Apocalypses contain a series of highly symbolic visions that are “mediated” by a heavenly messenger, who explains their meaning.
- C. There are often *violent repetitions* in the visions—that is, repetitions of the same sequence of events over and over again, which “violate” any literal, chronological reading.
- D. The visions often move from disaster to triumph to show that even though things will get much worse, in the end, truth, justice, and God himself will prevail.
- E. The motivation of these apocalypses is to encourage those who are suffering and to urge believers to hold on till the end.

- IV.** The best known apocalypse from Christian antiquity, of course, is the book of Revelation.
- A. The book of Revelation contains a series of revelations given to a prophet named John, who has been exiled to the isle of Patmos.
1. John has a vision of the throne of God, who is holding a scroll fastened with seven seals. This represents the future course of Earth's history.
  2. The Lamb of God breaks the seals. As each seal is broken, a catastrophe hits the Earth. The breaking of the last seal sets off a chaotic series of catastrophes.
  3. Finally, an antichrist appears who makes war with Christ in heaven. Christ wins and the evil forces are purged from Earth.
  4. Christ reigns for a thousand years and there is a final judgment, in which all against God are judged, and God brings into existence a new heaven and Earth, where there is no suffering.
  5. It would be a mistake to rip Revelation out of its context—as is usually done—and claim that it is a blueprint for our own future.
- B. Revelation was written in its own historical context of Christian persecution and Christian apathy and is meant to address those concerns.
- C. The symbolic visions of the book indicate that it was meant for Christians in the Roman Empire.
1. This can be seen clearly, for example, in the vision of the whore of Babylon in chapter 17, who is described in such a way as to make it certain that the text is referring to the ancient city of Rome.
  2. And it can be seen in other symbols, such as the number of the Antichrist, 666, which appears to be a reference to the Emperor Nero (the letters of whose name add up to 666!).
- V.** But there were other apocalypses that were popular in the early Church as well, including the Apocalypse of Peter.
- A. Written in the name of Simon Peter, this book was thought by some Christians to belong to the canon of Scripture.
- B. This is clearly a heavenly vision type of apocalypse.
- C. It is, in fact, the first Christian account that we have of a guided tour of heaven and hell, a forerunner of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
- VI.** Even though The Shepherd of Hermas is the only apocalypse among the Apostolic Fathers, it was the kind of book that enjoyed considerable popularity among Christians in the first two centuries of the Common Era.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, chapter 28.

Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

David Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*.

John Collins, *Apocalypse: Morphology of a Genre*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. How does understanding how apocalypses worked as a genre affect the interpretation of the book of Revelation? Should it be seen as a prediction of what is still to happen in the future?
2. What kind of book written today would be the closest thing to ancient apocalypses?

# Lecture Twenty-One

## The Letter to Diognetus—An Apology

**Scope:** The final writing of the Apostolic Fathers to be considered is an anonymous book called the Letter to Diognetus. This represents one of the earliest surviving instances we have of a Christian *apology*. The word *apology* in this context does not mean saying that one is “sorry.” It comes from the Greek word *apologia* and refers to a reasoned “defense” of Christian claims against their cultured despisers.

The Letter to Diognetus is an intellectual defense of Christianity that argues for its moral and doctrinal superiority in the face of opposition to it by the pagans who made up the majority of the ancient Roman world. In this lecture, we will examine the letter’s arguments that Christianity is not only a valid religion but, in fact, the one superior religion to be adhered to by all, rather than persecuted as an aberrant faith.

### Outline

- I. To this point, we have considered nine writings of the Apostolic Fathers. In this lecture, we deal with the final one, a literary gem known as the Letter to Diognetus.
  - A. This book is unique among the work of the Apostolic Fathers in that it is an *apology* for the Christian faith.
    1. The term *apology*, in this context, refers to a reasoned defense of a philosophical or religious tradition (the Greek word for “defense” is *apologia*).
    2. Apologies became a popular literary form among Christians starting in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, as that was when the Christian Church had both the need and the ability to defend itself.
    3. The Church needed to defend itself because of the increased notice it was receiving from the world at large and the Roman government in particular (in terms of persecution).
    4. It was able to defend itself because a number of intellectuals had begun to convert to the faith who could argue for Christianity’s innocence before the state, on the one hand, and its moral and religious superiority, on the other.
    5. Christianity grew from about 20 followers of Jesus right after his death to about 5% of the Roman empire (or three million people) by the early 4<sup>th</sup> century.
    6. Christianity’s defenders included Tertullian in North Africa, Origen in Alexandria, Justine Martyr in Rome, and others.

- B. We have already seen the context of persecution of Christians in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries.
1. Christians were out of favor among the general populace because they were known not to worship the state and local gods and because they were suspected of committing social improprieties.
  2. Jews, of course, also did not worship the state gods, but they were tolerated because they held to ancient traditions of their own.
  3. Christians, on the other hand, were known not to hold to ancient traditions but to subscribe to a relatively new faith.
  4. That is part of the reason that some Christians, such as the author of the Letter of Barnabas, were so intent to claim the ancient traditions of the Jews for themselves.
  5. This was a ploy used by a number of apologists, as well, including the most famous of them all, Justin Martyr.
  6. As it turns out, it is not the ploy used by the anonymous author of the Letter to Diognetus, who defends the faith using other arguments.

- II. Even though it is a stylistically superior work, the Letter to Diognetus was not well known throughout antiquity.
- A. It is never mentioned, let alone quoted, by any other early Christian author.
  - B. In fact, it remained unknown until a manuscript containing its text was discovered by a young cleric among some papers used to wrap fish in a fishmonger's shop in Constantinople in 1436.
  - C. The manuscript was transcribed by scholars several times over the course of the next couple of centuries.
  - D. Unfortunately, the manuscript itself, which was eventually deposited in the municipal library of Strasbourg, was destroyed by fire during the bombing of the city in the Franco-German war in 1870.

- III. Given the fact that the book is not mentioned by other early Christian authors, it is difficult to say much about it.
- A. Its author is anonymous.
  - B. The recipient of the letter was someone named Diognetus, which literally means "born of Zeus."
    1. Given that he is called "most excellent," he may have been a Roman official of some kind or a person of high status (possibly the tutor of Marcus Aurelius?).
    2. Or his name may simply be a cipher for an imaginary reader, much like the recipient of the New Testament books of Luke and Acts, Theophilus ("beloved of God").

- C. Scholars dispute the date of the work, but given its apologetic concerns and somewhat unsophisticated theology, it may be best to date it to the middle or late 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

**IV.** The theme of the book is expressed already at the outset (ch. 1).

- A. Diognetus wants to know about the nature of the Christian religion, about why Christians don't accept the gods of the pagans, yet don't worship in the same way as the Jews.
- B. The book tries to answer these questions one at a time, beginning with the question of Christian views of pagan gods (ch. 2).
  - 1. Here, the author attacks pagan idols as being no more than the material that they are made of (2:2–4).
  - 2. This is a kind of polemical attack found commonly in Jewish and Christian writings, for example, in Isa. 44:9 ff.
- C. The letter then appeals to “common knowledge” that the distinctive features of Judaism, such as Sabbath observance, circumcision, and kosher food laws, are both ridiculous and superstitious (chs. 3–4).
- D. Next, the author argues for the innocence and superiority of Christians.
  - 1. They live in socially innocuous and common ways (ch. 5).
  - 2. But they are morally superior to everyone else (ch. 5).
  - 3. They are to the world what the soul is to the body: that which gives it life (ch. 6).
  - 4. Their religion was not “dreamt up” but came from the one true God himself (ch. 7).
  - 5. Thus, the Christian understanding of God is superior to anything imagined by pagan philosophers (8:1–4).
  - 6. The author concludes with some long reflections on how much God has loved the world and patiently endured its ungodly behavior, but he will soon enter into judgment with all those who refuse to accept his revelation in Christ (10:7–8).

**V.** In sum, the Letter of Diognetus is an early example of Christian apology, in which the unknown author, a member of a persecuted minority in the empire, makes the audacious claim that his religion is, in fact, superior to everything else the empire has to offer and should be adopted by all, rather than subjected to imperial disfavor and opposition.

**Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “Epistle to Diognetus,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, pp. 122–159.

Clayton Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp. 159–169.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Henry Meecham, *The Epistle to Diognetus*.

Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. From a “pagan’s” point of view, why would it make sense to try to stamp out the Christian religion?
2. Why would the defense mounted by the Letter to Diognetus probably not prove to be persuasive to a pagan or Jewish audience?

## Lecture Twenty-Two

# Apologetics in Early Christianity

**Scope:** The consideration of the Letter to Diognetus in the preceding lecture takes us into the interesting realm of Christian apologetics: that is, the intellectual defense of Christianity against those who found it to be a baseless and even harmful superstition. In this lecture, we will consider some of the charges leveled against Christianity in the first two centuries—for example, that it promoted atheism (because it didn’t acknowledge the gods) and flagrant immorality (Christians were accused, among other things, of infanticide and cannibalism!). We will then see how Christians mounted arguments against these charges and went even further to maintain that only followers of Christ could hope to escape the fires of hell and inherit eternal life with God in heaven.

## Outline

- I. In the preceding lecture, we began to see how Christians started writing apologies for the faith in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century.
  - A. An apology is a reasoned “defense” (Greek: *apologia*) of the faith against its cultured despisers.
  - B. Christians needed to defend their faith because they were a persecuted minority in the Roman Empire.
  - C. We can get a fuller sense of the charges widely leveled against the Christians from some of these apologies, especially the *Octavius* written by Minucius Felix.
    1. Minucius Felix was a Christian intellectual living in Latin-speaking North Africa in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
    2. His work, the *Octavius*, records an imaginary conversation that took place between a pagan named Caecilian and a Christian named Octavius about the nature of the Christian religion.
    3. In it, Caecilian describes in graphic detail some of the charges of moral impropriety leveled against the Christians, namely that they engaged in sexual license, including incest, infanticide, and cannibalism (*Octavius*, chap. 9).
    4. These charges might seem incredible to us today, but they were believable in a world that knew Christians to form a secret society that met under the cover of darkness, where “brothers and sisters” greeted one another with kisses and ate the flesh and drank the blood of the “son” of God!
    5. On top of all this, Christians were widely considered to be atheists—literally, “without the gods”—in that they rejected the gods otherwise worshiped by pagans in the empire.

- II.** To get a fuller sense of how Christian intellectuals defended themselves against such charges, we can consider the apology written by Athenagoras, a Christian philosopher from Athens.
- A.** Called the “Plea Regarding the Christians,” this apology was written in A.D. 177.
  - B.** Like many apologies, it is addressed to the reigning Roman emperors (Marcus Aurelius and Commodus).
    - 1.** It is unlikely that emperors ever read such literature.
    - 2.** It may be best to consider such writings to be “open letters” to the all-powerful rulers or even “in-house” literature, providing Christians themselves with ammunition for their battle against their opponents.
  - C.** The apology begins with a statement of the Christians’ innocence and unjust suffering.
  - D.** It continues with a plea that Christians be punished for actual crimes against the state, not for their name (ch. 2).
    - 1.** This sounds like a reasonable request, but it must be remembered that the name *Christian* actually meant something to both pagans and Christians themselves.
    - 2.** In particular, anyone who claimed this name refused to worship the state gods, and that was widely known to be a problem.
  - E.** Athenagoras then names the three charges typically associated with the name of *Christian*: atheism, Thyestian feasts (that is, cannibalism), and Oedipean intercourse (that is, incest) (ch. 3).
  - F.** He proceeds to show that the charges are without foundation, one by one.
  - G.** It is not true that Christians are atheists.
    - 1.** Atheists were rare in the ancient world.
    - 2.** There were certain groups that were called “atheists” including the Epicureans, who believed that, at death, the body’s atoms disperse so there is no afterlife.
    - 3.** Minucius Felix points out that unlike other “atheists” of the ancient world, Christians were not complete materialists but distinguished God from matter (ch. 4).
    - 4.** This might be a reference to the Epicureans who believed the gods were made up of atoms like the rest of the universe.
    - 5.** Moreover, Minucius Felix continues, Christians actually have more than one “God,” even though God is “one,” because God has a Son who is also worshiped.
    - 6.** In addition, Christians worship the Spirit as divine and acknowledge the existence of other supernatural beings.

- 7. It is true that Christians do not worship these divine beings through animal sacrifices, but that, in fact, shows the superiority of their religion (ch. 10).
  - 8. Moreover, other peoples in the empire are allowed to worship their own gods: Christians alone should not be isolated as worthy of punishment (ch. 14).
- H.** It is also not true that Christians engage in grossly immoral acts.
- 1. Athenagoras suggests that pagans who make this charge against Christians must be thinking about the activities of their own gods (ch. 32)!
  - 2. In fact, Christians are highly moral, not allowing even the *thoughts* of immoral activities, let alone indulgence of the activities themselves (ch. 33).
  - 3. Far from engaging in infanticide and cannibalism, Christians don't even watch gladiatorial contests or expose their children (ch. 35).
- I.** In short, none of the charges against the Christians can be held up to scrutiny; therefore, Christians should not be punished by the state.

**III.** There were other stock arguments used by other apologists throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries.

- A.** Some others argued that Christianity is proved to be true by the fact that Christ fulfilled prophecies made about him hundreds of years before he was born.
- B.** Yet others argued that there should be a strict separation of Church and state, that the state apparatus should not be involved with matters of personal religion.
  - 1. This latter was an argument that most people in the ancient world would have found nonsensical.
  - 2. It's worth noting that as soon as the Roman emperor became Christian, theologians stopped making this argument!

**IV.** But it wasn't until this conversion of the emperor that the need for Christian apologies ceased, in the early years of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

**Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *After The New Testament: A Reader* pp. 51–94.

Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Arthur Droege, *Moses or Homer: Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture*.

Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. How might a pagan have argued against Athenagoras's claim that Christians should not be persecuted simply for their "name"?
2. How might different people living in different countries today react to the apologists' insistence that the state not be involved with matters of religion?

## Lecture Twenty-Three

# The Apostolic Fathers as a Collection

**Scope:** In this lecture, we will begin to wrap up the series by considering several of the key overarching issues that have emerged from our study of the Apostolic Fathers, especially as these relate to the emergence of Christianity as a world religion. How is it that Christianity became the kind of religion that it did? Why did it shift so radically away from the teachings of the historical Jesus himself? What kind of religion had it become by the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, some 120 years after Jesus' death?

In particular, we will consider what the Apostolic Fathers can tell us about the three pillars of the emerging Christian Church: the canon of Scripture, the creed to be confessed by all Christians, and the clerical hierarchy within the Church.

## Outline

- I. We have covered a broad range of material in these lectures on the Apostolic Fathers. I can begin summarizing what we have discovered by stressing the wide diversity one finds in this collection of authors.
  - A. The books themselves deal with a wide range of issues.
    - 1. 1 Clement is an attempt of the church of Rome to reverse an ecclesiastical coup in the church of Corinth.
    - 2. 2 Clement is a sermon encouraging its hearers to rejoice in the salvation they have received.
    - 3. The Letters of Ignatius are written in haste to several congregations of Asia Minor, urging them to avoid false teachers and to adhere to the authority of their bishop.
    - 4. The Letter of Polycarp is addressed to the Christians of Philippi, giving them advice about how to live in community together.
    - 5. The Martyrdom of Polycarp is an eyewitness account of the arrest, trial, and death of the bishop of Smyrna.
    - 6. The Letter of Barnabas is focused on the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, arguing that the Jewish religion is and always has been a colossal mistake.
    - 7. The Didache is a Church order that gives instructions about how to live, how to perform Christian rituals, and what to do about wandering prophets who were taking advantage of the communities they visited.
    - 8. The fragments of Papias contain apocryphal accounts of the sayings and deeds of Jesus and his followers.

9. The Shepherd of Hermas is an apocalypse that describes visions of the author that are meant to encourage believers in their lives on Earth and to urge them to repent before the end arrives.
  10. The Letter to Diognetus is an apology that defends Christianity against the charges of its cultured critics and argues that the Christian religion is, in fact, superior to all others.
- B. These books are of different genres: several letters, a sermon, a martyrology, a Church order, a fragmentary commentary, an apocalypse, and an apology.
- C. They come from a range of dates, from the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century (1 Clement) to, probably, near the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> (the Letter to Diognetus).
- D. How, then, does it make sense to collect these works together into a body of writings and circulate them as “the” Apostolic Fathers?
- II. Even though this collection was made in relatively modern times, there is evidence of some movements toward collecting some of these works together from the earliest of times.
- A. The Letters of Ignatius, for example, were evidently collected first by none other than Polycarp.
- B. Some biblical manuscripts contain a couple of these works.
- C. And Codex Constantinopolitanus, for example, contains 1 and 2 Clement, the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Letters of Ignatius.
- III. Nonetheless, most of these writings were unknown and unread throughout most of the history of Christianity.
- A. In the early centuries of Christianity, some of these works were regarded as Scripture (for example, The Shepherd and the Letter of Barnabas).
- B. Eventually, however, the canon of the New Testament was formed without them.
- C. Most of them were forgotten for centuries, through the Middle Ages and even the Reformation.
  1. Even though some of them were known in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Protestants and Catholics were not particularly interested in them.
  2. Protestants were completely obsessed with Scripture (*sola Scriptura*) and Catholics were more interested in the later “great” theologians, such as Jerome and Augustine.
- D. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, however, interest shifted to a concern for what the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament had to say.
  1. In part, this shift was fueled by the discovery of new manuscripts, such as Codex Alexandrinus, which contained 1 and 2 Clement, in 1627.

2. In part, it was generated by a concern on all sides to show the antiquity of their particular theological and ecclesiastical views.
3. Nowhere is this concern more evident than in the debates between the famous scholar James Ussher and John Milton over the legitimacy of the Church hierarchy.
4. The debates, which raged in Britain in the 1640s were over the legitimacy of the church hierarchy.
5. When the Reformation came to Britain, bishops and archbishops remained extremely powerful in the Church of England.
6. The widely popular Calvinist movement—especially as embodied by radical Puritans—resented this power. They wanted the church to abandon its hierarchical system, which they saw as a corruption of the teaching of the apostles.
7. The advocates of the established church argued that ecclesiastical offices were supremely endowed with apostolic authority.
8. John Ussher was an archbishop and brilliant scholar, whose name was tarnished when he tried to claim that the world had begun in 4004 B.C.
9. Ussher held that the episcopacy was a divinely ordained institution. He included as evidence for his claim certain so-called “Letters of Ignatius” that Milton argued were forgeries.
10. Eventually, Ussher was vindicated on the grounds that his evidence also included the seven Letters of Ignatius that were known to be authentic.

**IV.** Largely as a result of these debates, there developed an interest in collecting the earliest non-canonical writings together.

- A. The first collection was made by a French scholar, Cotelier, in 1672.
- B. Various collections were made at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- C. Different scholars had different criteria for deciding which books to include in the collection.
  1. Some thought that any works, forged or genuine, associated with the early non-canonical authors should be included.
  2. Others maintained that only genuine works produced by those who were actually companions of the apostles should be included.
  3. Both criteria are problematic on historical grounds: On the one hand, why would the forgeries be useful? But on the other hand, what if none of the authors was actually a companion of the apostles?
- D. The question of criteria continues to be debated today: If, for example, the oldest non-canonical writings are to be collected together, should this include early Christian apocrypha, such as the Gospel of Thomas?

- E. Probably the best solution is to include the earliest proto-orthodox writings from after the New Testament period, which are traditionally found in the collection.
- V. In significant ways, then, this collection is similar to, but different from, the writings that make up the New Testament.
  - A. The New Testament, too, is an ad hoc collection of writings of different genre, dates, authors, and emphases.
  - B. But it is an *ancient* collection.
  - C. And it is seen as an *authoritative* collection.
  - D. By contrast, the Apostolic Fathers is a modern and merely useful collection of early Christian writings from proto-orthodox circles.

**Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., “General Introduction,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 1–16.

Clayton Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, pp. 1–10.

**Supplementary Reading:**

L. W. Barnard, *Studies in the Apostolic Fathers and Their Background*.

Simon Tugwell, *The Apostolic Fathers*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. What do you see as the historical function of having such a disparate group of writings collected together and given a name (the Apostolic Fathers)?
2. If a 1<sup>st</sup>-century writing from, say, the apostle Paul were to turn up, do you think it should be included in the New Testament? Or could it be included in the Apostolic Fathers instead?

## Lecture Twenty-Four

# The Apostolic Fathers and Proto-Orthodoxy

**Scope:** In this final lecture, we will look back at what we have covered in the course to consider the historical significance of the Apostolic Fathers. We will stress that the collection of these writings into a corpus of literature is a modern invention: Unlike the New Testament (an ancient collection of books), the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, for the most part, circulated separately from one another over the centuries. But they are nonetheless significant as a group of writings: They cohere, in some rather basic ways, as the writings of those Christians whose views were eventually to “win out” in the struggle over what the Christian religion was eventually to become, when the Church throughout the world became the “Catholic” Church, with theological views and ritual practices that became standard throughout the Middle Ages and down to today.

## Outline

- I. We saw in our last lecture that the Apostolic Fathers is a useful collection of writings because it contains the earliest records of the proto-orthodox movement.
  - A. *Proto-orthodoxy* is a term used by historians to refer to the kind of Christianity that ended up as victorious by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Christian century.
  - B. Before that time, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, there were many different Christian groups with a wide range of belief and practice, scattered throughout Christendom.
  - C. The story of the victory of proto-orthodoxy is a long and intriguing one.
  - D. Older historians simply assumed that the orthodox view had always been the dominant one.
  - E. Many historians have come to see, instead, that it was simply one view—the one that happened to win out.
  - F. The older view of the relationship between heresy and orthodoxy is sometimes called the Eusebian view because it was first popularized by Eusebius, the father of church history.
    - 1. One of the values of Eusebius’ work is that he often quotes sources that have not survived.
    - 2. The Eusebian view of church history holds that the truth was communicated through Jesus to his apostles, who communicated it to the bishops they appointed, who, in their turn, communicated it to their successors.

3. Sometimes heretical offshoots would arise, such as Marcionism and Gnosticism,
  4. Orthodoxy goes back to Jesus; heresy is always a secondary corruption of orthodoxy, which is the view held by the majority.
- G.** The Eusebian model was exploded by Walter Bauer's book of 1934 entitled *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.
1. This book claims that Eusebius gave a slanted version of what really happened in early Christianity: what was later called heresy was the *original* form of Christian faith.
  2. According to Bauer, early Christianity is best understood as represented by pods of believers in different regions believing different things, as for example, Gnosticism in Egypt, and Marcionism in Asia Minor.
  3. Christ, as far back as can be traced, is characterized by wide-ranging diversity. Eventually, one of these groups managed to assert its authority over other Christian groups and grew to become the majority view, claiming that it had always been the majority view.
  4. It is no accident that the form of Christianity that took over the world is the form that was prevalent in Rome in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
  5. Bauer hypothesized that the reason why the Roman Church was so intent on reinstating the original presbyters in Corinth was because the Roman Church believed the new Corinthian presbyters were heretics.
  6. The Roman Church was the largest of the Christian churches and wealthy. It began using its influence and wealth to ensure that other churches and individual converts followed its beliefs and practices.
  7. After the Roman emperor converted to the Christianity of the Roman Church, other churches were outlawed.
  8. Christians writing about church history then made it appear that the Roman Church had always been favored by the majority.
  9. Bauer's understanding of early Christianity appears to be basically correct.
- H.** The victory of the proto-orthodox involved three developments, each of which played a significant role in the struggles to determine the shape of the Christian religion: the canon, the clergy, and the creed.
- II.** We can already see the beginnings of the formation of the New Testament canon within the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.
- A.** Even before these writings (or simultaneously with some of them), within the pages of the latest writings of the New Testament, we can see a movement toward a new canon of Scripture.

1. Christians, of course, had always had a canon, in that Jesus and his followers, as Jews, revered the writings of Jewish Scripture as canonical.
  2. By the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, some Christians were considering the sayings of Jesus and the writings of his apostles also as canonical.
- B. Some of the Apostolic Fathers show that the New Testament was beginning to be conceived of as a sacred collection of books.
1. Some writings, such as The Shepherd of Hermas, do not quote earlier texts.
  2. But with Ignatius, we find that the preaching of Jesus was seen as sharing equal importance with the Jewish Scriptures.
  3. And with the Letter of Polycarp, we see how extensively early Christian writings were sometimes accepted as canonical authorities.
- C. Some of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers were themselves accepted as Scripture.
- D. As time progressed, proto-orthodoxy applied several criteria to writings to decide which books should belong in Scripture and which should not.
- E. The decisions were not finally reached, however, until the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century or so.
- F. But even before the decisions were finalized, this movement to establish a set canon of Scripture proved important for the victory of proto-orthodoxy, because these books were authoritative accounts of what to believe and how to act.

### III. So, too, within the Apostolic Fathers, we can see the movement to establish a Church hierarchy.

- A. The earliest Christian communities were charismatic (that is, run by the spirit; cf. 1 Corinthians).
- B. But as problems arose, including the problem of “false teaching,” it became clear that leaders were needed who could run the churches.
- C. We see a movement in this direction already in the Didache, around A.D. 100.
- D. At about the same time, we see the importance of having the *right* leaders in 1 Clement.
- E. But it is especially with Ignatius, and his insistence on establishing a single bishop over every church, that we see the real movement toward a Church hierarchy.
- F. This movement would continue until we reach the Church structure that proved so effective in dealing with heresy and schism—each church with its own bishop and some regional bishops especially powerful, with the bishop of Rome seen as head of the entire Church.

- IV.** We also see, within the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, the movement to establish correct theological beliefs, which would eventuate in the familiar Christian creeds that have come down to us.
- A.** From its beginning, Christianity insisted that right belief was necessary for salvation—as opposed to nearly all other religions of the Roman world.
  - B.** In the Apostolic Fathers, we see a concern for those who embrace the wrong belief, for example, in the docetists encountered by Ignatius and Polycarp.
  - C.** To help counter false teaching, certain beliefs were confessed by Christians, for example, when they were baptized.
  - D.** Sometimes, these creeds took on a paradoxical character because of the false beliefs they were attempting to counter.
  - E.** We can see the paradoxical character of these statements of faith already in the time of Ignatius.
  - F.** Eventually, such paradoxes would lead to the orthodox understandings of Christ and the Trinity.
    - 1.** Christ was both fully human and fully divine.
    - 2.** The Trinity makes up one God, who is manifest in three persons.
- V.** In sum, the Apostolic Fathers are our earliest witnesses outside the New Testament for proto-orthodoxy—the kind of Christianity that came to be dominant and ended up determining the shape of the Christian religion for all time.

### **Essential Reading:**

Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, pp. 193–234, 309–316, 317–342, 405–436.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*.

Jeroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. In what ways other than those mentioned in the lecture do the Apostolic Fathers seem to adumbrate later developments within Christianity (for example, the retention of Jewish Scripture, the opposition to Jews, and so on)?
2. In your opinion, is it important to know how and why, historically, Christianity became the kind of religion it did? Why or why not?

## Timeline

4 B.C.?	Jesus' birth
A.D. 14–37	Emperor Tiberius
26–36	Pilate as Governor of Judea
30?	Jesus' death
33?	Conversion of Paul
37–41	Emperor Caligula
41–54	Emperor Claudius
50–60	Pauline Epistles
50?–110	Ignatius of Antioch
54–68	Emperor Nero
62–113	Pliny the Younger
65?	Gospel of Mark
66–70	Jewish Revolt and destruction of the Temple
69–79	Emperor Vespasian
70–156	Polycarp of Smyrna
79–81	Emperor Titus
80–85?	Gospels of Matthew and Luke, book of Acts
81–96	Emperor Domitian
90–95?	Gospel of John
95?	Clement of Rome
95?	Book of Revelation
96?	1 Clement
98–117	Emperor Trajan
100?	The Didache
100–165	Justin Martyr
100–160?	Marcion
110–140?	The Shepherd of Hermas
120–140?	Papias

- 130–200 ..... Irenaeus
- 135? ..... Epistle of Barnabas
- 140–160? ..... 2 Clement
- 155? ..... Martyrdom of Polycarp
- 160–225 ..... Tertullian
- 180–190? ..... Letter to Diognetus
- d. 190 ..... Melito of Sardis
- 249–251 ..... Emperor Decius
- 260–340 ..... Eusebius
- 285–337 ..... Constantine (emperor, 306–337)
- 300–375 ..... Athanasius
- 303–312 ..... The “Great Persecution”
- 312 ..... “Conversion” of Constantine
- 325 ..... Council of Nicea

## Glossary

**Adoptionism:** The view that Jesus was not divine but was a flesh-and-blood human being who had been adopted by God to be his son at his baptism.

**Apocalypse:** A literary genre common in ancient Judaism and Christianity, in which a mortal prophet is given visions either of the heavenly realm or the future fate of the Earth and is told how these visions can explain the mundane realities faced by the Church.

**Apocalypticism:** A worldview held by many ancient Jews and Christians that maintained that the present age is controlled by forces of evil but that these will be destroyed at the end of time, when God intervenes in history to bring in his kingdom, an event thought to be imminent.

**Apologists:** Group of 2<sup>nd</sup>- and 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Christian intellectuals who wrote treatises defending Christianity against charges leveled against it.

**Apology:** Literally “defense,” used as a technical term for a reasoned defense of the faith against its opponents.

**Apostle:** From a Greek word meaning “one who is sent.” In early Christianity, the term designated emissaries of the faith who were special representatives of Christ.

**Apostolic succession:** The doctrine espoused by members of the proto-orthodox community that their version of the Christian faith could be traced through a series of Christian leaders all the way back to the apostles themselves.

**Baptism:** The Christian practice that became an “initiation” ritual in which a person was made a member of the community through immersion in (or sprinkling of) water.

**Bishop:** The Greek word for bishop literally means “overseer.” Originally, bishops were simply the leaders of the local churches; by the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, bishops were beginning to receive greater power to make all the authoritative decisions in the church.

**Canon:** From a Greek word that literally means “ruler” or “straight edge.” The term is used to designate a recognized collection of texts; the New Testament canon is, thus, the collection of books that Christians have traditionally accepted as authoritative.

**Catechumenate:** A term that refers to the period of instruction in the rudiments of the Christian faith undertaken by converts who were preparing for baptism.

**Charismatic community:** A religious community that is organized not under the leadership of individuals but in which every member has a “gift” (Greek: *charisma*) of the Spirit that enables the community to function together.

**Chiliasm:** From the Greek word for a “thousand,” *chiliasm* refers to the belief that there would be a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on Earth (also called the *millennium*).

**Deacons:** From a Greek word that literally means “ministers,” deacons were leaders in the Church who were predominantly concerned with the physical well-being of its members (for example, they had charge of alms collection and the like).

**Dead Sea Scrolls:** First discovered in 1947 in caves near the west shore of the Dead Sea, these are Jewish writings that contain a number of copies of the Hebrew Bible, commentaries, rules for how the community was to live together, and other important documents.

**Deutero-Pauline Epistles:** Letters of the New Testament that claim to be written by Paul but appear to have been written instead by his followers in the next generation; these include Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

**Docetism:** The view that Jesus was not a human being but only “appeared” to be; from a Greek word that means “to seem” or “to appear.”

**Doctrine of the two paths:** A form of ethical instruction found in both the Didache and the Letter of Barnabas, in which readers are told that they have the choice of following either the path of light (or life) or darkness (death), depending on how they choose to live.

**Ebionites:** A group of 2<sup>nd</sup>-century adoptionists who maintained Jewish practices and Jewish forms of worship.

**Eucharist:** From a Greek word that literally means “giving thanks,” this is a technical term that refers to the commemoration of Christ’s death in a periodic sacred meal (the Lord’s Supper), as instituted in the Last Supper.

**Gnosticism:** A group of ancient religions, closely related to Christianity, that maintained that sparks of a divine being had become entrapped in the present, evil world and could escape only by acquiring the appropriate secret *gnosis* (Greek for “knowledge”) of who they were and how they could escape. This *gnosis* was generally thought to have been brought by an emissary descended from the divine realm.

**Heresy:** Any worldview or set of beliefs deemed by those in power to be deviant; from a Greek word that means “choice” (because “heretics” have “chosen” to deviate from the “truth”; see **orthodoxy**).

**Judaizing:** Any approach to Christianity that insists that followers of Jesus continue to keep the Jewish Law.

**Manual of Discipline:** One of the documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which like some of the early Christian texts, contains the doctrine of the two paths.

**Marcionites:** Followers of Marcion, the second-century Christian scholar and evangelist, later labeled a heretic for his docetic Christology and his belief in two Gods, the harsh legalistic God of the Jews and the merciful loving God of Jesus—views that he claimed to have found in the writings of Paul.

**Martyr:** From the Greek word for “witness,” a Christian martyr is anyone who bears ultimate witness to Christ, that is, by dying for him.

**Martyrology:** A literary text that describes the trial and execution of a martyr or a group of martyrs, such as the Martyrdom of Polycarp.

**Monepiscopacy:** The teaching, first found in the Letters of Ignatius, that there should be one and only one leader of the Church—the bishop—who makes all the important administrative decisions and provides all the important theological and spiritual guidance.

**Muratorian Canon:** An 8<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript, copied probably from a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century original, that lists the books that its author considered to belong to the New Testament canon. This is probably our earliest surviving canon list.

**Orthodoxy:** Literally, “right opinion”; a term used to designate a worldview or set of beliefs acknowledged to be true by the majority of those in power. For its opposite, see **heresy**.

**Paganism:** Any of the polytheistic religions of the Greco-Roman world; an umbrella term for ancient Mediterranean religions other than Judaism and Christianity.

**Pesher:** A method of interpretation found in some of the biblical commentaries among the Dead Sea Scrolls, in which a text was cited, followed by an explanation of its contemporary relevance (“this is what it means”).

**Pope:** From a word related to “papa,” this refers to the bishop of the church of Rome, understood to be the head of the entire Christian Church.

**Presbyters:** From a Greek word that literally means “elders,” these were the official leaders of local Christian congregations.

**Proto-orthodoxy:** A form of Christianity endorsed by some Christians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries (including the Apostolic Fathers) that promoted doctrines that were declared “orthodox” by the victorious Christian party in the 4<sup>th</sup> and later centuries.

**Torah:** From a Hebrew word that means something like “law” or “guidance,” the term *Torah* refers either to the Law given by God to Moses or to the five first books of the Hebrew Bible, allegedly written by Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

**Trinity:** Key doctrine of orthodox Christianity that maintains that the godhead consists of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are all equally God, even though there is only one God.

## Biographical Notes

**Athanasius:** Athanasius was a highly influential and controversial bishop of Alexandria throughout the middle half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Born around A.D. 300, he was active in the large and powerful Alexandrian church already as a young man, appointed as deacon to the then-bishop, Alexander. He served as secretary at the important Council of Nicea in 325, which attempted to resolve critical issues concerning the nature of Christ as fully divine, of the same substance as God the father, and co-eternal with the father.

As bishop of Alexandria from 328–375, Athanasius was a staunch defender of this Nicene understanding of Christ and a key player in the development of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, in which there were three distinct persons (Father, Son, and Spirit) who were nonetheless one God, all of the same substance. This defense created enormous difficulties for Athanasius in the face of powerful opposition, to which he reacted with a show of force (even violence). He was sent into exile on several occasions during his bishopric, spending nearly 16 years away from Alexandria while trying to serve as its bishop.

Author of numerous surviving works, Athanasius is also significant for his role in determining which books should be accepted in his churches as sacred Scripture. In A.D. 367, in his 39<sup>th</sup> annual “Festal Letter,” which like all the others, set the date for the celebration of Easter and included pastoral instruction, he indicated that the 27 books that we now have in the New Testament, and only those 27, should be regarded as canonical. This decree helped define the shape of the canon for all time and helped lead to the declaration of other books, such as the Gnostic gospels and the like, as heretical.

**Athenagoras:** Not much is known about the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Christian apologist Athenagoras, as he is scarcely mentioned in the writings of other church fathers. The few references to him that survive indicate that he was a Greek philosopher who lived in Athens. His best known work is his Christian “Apology” (“Defense”), addressed to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, probably written in 177. In it, he defends Christians against charges of atheism and crass immorality involving incestuous orgies and ritual cannibalism and tries to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith to all others. Among his notable contributions to Christian theology is his indication that Christians worship three who are God (the Father), the Son, and the Holy Spirit; eventually, such reflections led to the formation of the classical doctrine of the Trinity.

**Barnabas:** We are not well informed about the historical Barnabas. He is mentioned both by the apostle Paul (Gal. 2:13; 1 Cor. 9:6) and the book of Acts (Acts 9:27; 11:22–26) as one of Paul’s traveling companions, and it appears that he was originally a Hellenistic Jew who converted to faith in Christ, then

became, like Paul, a traveling missionary who spread the faith. The book of Acts goes so far as to consider him one of the apostles (Acts 14:4, 14).

The Epistle (or Letter) of Barnabas discussed in this course is attributed to him, but modern scholars are reasonably sure that he could not have written it. The book appears to have been written some time around A.D. 130 or 135, some 60 years or so after the historical Barnabas would have died. The book was attributed to him, then, by Christians who wanted to advance its authoritative claims as being rooted in the views of one of the most important figures from the early years of Christianity.

**Clement of Rome:** Clement of Rome is another figure about whom we do not have much information. Tradition indicates that he was the second or third bishop of Rome (the disciple Simon Peter having been the first). He may be mentioned in The Shepherd of Hermas as the “foreign correspondent” for the Roman church (prior to becoming bishop?). He is allegedly the author of both 1 and 2 Clement, but it is clear that these two books were written by two different persons, and in neither book is Clement ever mentioned, let alone named as the author.

**Diognetus:** Diognetus is the unknown recipient of the apology known as the Letter to Diognetus. Literally, his name means “born of Zeus.” Because he is called “most excellent” in the letter, there are some scholars who think that he must have been some kind of Roman official. There is known to have been a tutor of the emperor Marcus Aurelius by this name, and thus, some have argued that this is the intended recipient of the letter. It is also possible, however, that the name is meant merely as a cipher for anyone among the pagans who is interested in knowing about the Christian religion and for seeing that, far from being a danger to Roman society, it is, in fact, the one superior religion in the world.

**Eusebius:** Eusebius of Caesarea is one of the most important figures in the history of the early Church. Born around A.D. 260, he was trained by some of the leading Christian scholars of his time and was to become the first author to produce a full history of Christianity up to his own day, in a book called the *Ecclesiastical* (or *Church*) *History*. Eusebius was quite active in the politics of the Church and empire; ordained bishop of the large and important church of Caesarea in 315, he was active at the Council of Nicea and the theological disputes in its aftermath, originally opposing but later accepting the creedal statements about Christ that were to become orthodox. He died around A.D. 340.

Eusebius was a prolific writer, but it was his *Ecclesiastical History* in particular that made a significant impact on subsequent generations—down to our own day. This chronological sketch of early Christianity provides us with the majority of our information about the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world, the persecution of the early Christians, the conflicts between what Eusebius considered to be orthodoxy and heresies, the development of

Church offices and structures, and so on. Of particular value in this 10-volume work is Eusebius's frequent citation, often lengthy, of his sources, so that through his account, we have access to the writings of his Christian predecessors, which otherwise, have been lost to history. Thus, even though Eusebius puts his own slant on the history that he tells, it is possible to use the sources he cites to gain significant insight into the conflicts and developments that transpired in the Christian Church of the first three centuries, up to his own day.

**Hermas:** The author of *The Shepherd* is known to us only through the autobiographical references scattered throughout his work. It appears that he had been raised as a slave in the household of a woman named Rhoda, but that he had been set free while still young. He evidently then married and raised a family, in or around Rome.

In *The Shepherd*, Hermas recounts a number of symbolic visions that he received in which he was given instruction concerning the current state of the Christian Church and the need for people to repent in view of the imminent end to be brought by Christ. These visions are interpreted to him by angelic mediators, in particular, one that comes to him in the guise of a shepherd, hence the name of the book. This is the longest writing we have from the first two centuries of the Christian Church.

**Ignatius of Antioch:** Ignatius is one of the most interesting figures from the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. We know little of his life, except that he was bishop of the major church in Antioch, Syria, and had been arrested for Christian activities and was sent to Rome under armed guard to face execution by being thrown to the wild beasts in the Roman arena. En route to his martyrdom, Ignatius wrote seven surviving letters to churches that had sent representatives to greet him. In these letters, he warns against false teachers, urges the churches to strive for unity, stresses the need for the churches to adhere to the teachings and policies of the one bishop residing over each of them, and emphasizes that he is eager to face his violent death so that he might be a true disciple of Christ.

One of the letters Ignatius wrote was to the bishop of the city of Smyrna, Polycarp, who may have been the one who collected the other letters together. Within a couple of centuries, other Christian authors forged other letters allegedly by Ignatius; throughout the Middle Ages, these forgeries were circulated with the authentic letters and were not recognized for what they were until scholars undertook an assiduous examination of them in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Justin Martyr:** Justin was an important figure in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>-century church of Rome. Born of pagan parents (c. A.D. 100), evidently in Samaria, he undertook secular philosophical training before converting to Christianity when he was about 30. He began to teach the philosophical superiority of Christianity to secular learning, first in Ephesus and then in Rome, where he established a kind of Christian philosophical school in mid-century.

Justin is the first prominent Christian *apologist*, that is, one who defended the Christian faith against the charges of its cultured (pagan) despisers and strove to show its intellectual and moral superiority to anything that the pagan (or Jewish) world could offer. Three of his major works survive, usually known as his First Apology (a defense of Christianity addressed to the emperor Antoninus Pius and his sons, including Marcus Aurelius, around A.D. 155); his Second Apology (addressed to the Roman Senate around A.D. 160); and his Dialogue with Trypho, an account of his conversion and subsequent debate with a (possibly fictitious) Jewish rabbi, Trypho, over the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, based largely on an exposition of key passages in the Old Testament.

Justin's defense of Christianity led to political opposition; he was martyred on charges of being a Christian around 165.

**Marcion:** Marcion was one of the most infamous “heretics” of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Tradition indicates that he was born and raised in Sinope, on the southern shore of the Black Sea, where as a young man, he acquired considerable wealth as a shipping merchant. His father was allegedly the bishop of the Christian church there, who excommunicated his son for his false teachings. In A.D. 139, Marcion went to Rome, where he spent five years developing his theological views, before presenting them to a specially called council of the Church leaders. Rather than accepting Marcion’s understanding of the Gospel, however, the Church expelled him for false teaching. Marcion then journeyed into Asia Minor, where he proved remarkably successful in converting others to his understanding of the Christian message. “Marcionite” churches were in existence for centuries after his death, around A.D. 160.

Marcion’s understanding of the Gospel was rooted in his interpretation of the writings of the apostle Paul, whose differentiation between the Law (of the Old Testament) and the Gospel (of Christ) Marcion took to an extreme, claiming that the old and new were fundamentally different, so much so that they represented the religions of different Gods. Marcion, in other words, was a *ditheist*, who thought that the Old Testament God—who had created the world, called Israel to be his people, and gave them his Law—was a different god from the God of Jesus, who came into the world in the “appearance” of human flesh (because he was not actually part of the material world of the creator-god) to save people from the just but wrathful God of the Jews. Marcion’s views were based on his canon of Scripture—the first canon known to be formally advanced by a Christian—which did not, obviously, contain anything from the Old Testament but comprised a form of the Gospel of Luke and 10 of Paul’s letters (all those in the present New Testament except 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus).

**Marcus Aurelius:** Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121–180) ruled as Roman emperor from A.D. 161–180. He is probably best known as a “philosopher”-emperor, because he was one of the leading spokespersons for the philosophy of Stoicism in the ancient world. His private journal, *The Meditations*, still survives; in it, he

reflects on his life and urges himself to live rationally in light of his inner resources.

It was during the reign of Marcus Aurelius that Christians in Lyons and Vienne (in Gaul) were subject to the horrendous persecutions described in the Letter of Lyons and Vienne preserved for us in the writings of Eusebius.

**Minucius Felix:** Minucius Felix is an otherwise unknown Christian author from Latin-speaking North Africa who, sometime in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, wrote an apology called the *Octavian*. The book is named after one of the characters in the book, “Octavius,” who is said to enter into a long discussion with a pagan, Caecillian, over the competing virtues of the Christian versus the pagan religion. In the course of the discussion, Octavius not only lays out arguments for the superiority of the Christian philosophy, but he also describes the superior moral rectitude of the Christians. In so doing, he is compelled to address the charges leveled against the Christians that they are, in fact, prone to wild and licentious activities that make them socially disruptive and dangerous.

**Nero:** Nero (A.D. 37–68) was the Roman emperor in A.D. 54–68, during the time that the apostle Paul, for example, wrote his letters. For the history of early Christianity, he is probably best known as being the first emperor to persecute the Christians. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero arranged for the city of Rome to be burned to allow implementation of some of his own architectural designs for its reconstruction. When the populace came to suspect Nero’s involvement in the fire, he decided to lay the blame on the Christians, who were a widely despised group in any event; he had Christians rounded up, condemned for arson, and executed in gruesome and humiliating ways. Nero’s treatment of Christians may have set the stage for subsequent imperial persecutions.

**Papias:** Papias was an early- to mid-2<sup>nd</sup>-century proto-orthodox bishop of Hierapolis who is best known to history as author of a now-lost work called *An Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*. In this five-volume work, Papias describes the information he had received about Jesus’ teachings from the companions of his disciples. We know of the book only as it was quoted on occasion by later authors. These quotations show that numerous legendary expansions of the Gospel traditions were in circulation for decades after the composition of the New Testament Gospels. They also show that Papias was a *chiliast*, that is, that he subscribed to the view that there would be a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on Earth in which paradisiacal conditions would prevail. Later theologians considered this view naive and dangerous and, thus, chose not to preserve Papias’s writings.

**Paul the Apostle:** Paul was a Hellenistic Jew who was born and raised outside of Palestine. We do not know when he was born, but it was probably sometime during the first decade A.D. Through his own letters and the encomiastic account found in the book of Acts, we can learn something of his history. He

was raised as a strict Pharisaic Jew and prided himself in his scrupulous religiosity. At some point in his early adulthood, he learned of the Christians and their proclamation of the crucified man Jesus as the messiah; incensed by this claim, Paul began a rigorous campaign of persecution against the Christians—only to be converted himself to faith in Jesus through some kind of visionary experience.

Paul then became an ardent proponent of the faith and its best-known missionary. He saw his call as a missionary to the Gentiles and worked in major urban areas in the regions of Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia to establish churches through the conversion of former pagan. A distinctive aspect of his message was that all people, Jew and Gentile, are made right with God through Jesus' death and resurrection, and by no other means; the practical payoff was that Gentiles did not need to become Jewish in order to be among the people of the Jewish God—in particular, the men did not need to become circumcised.

We know about Paul principally through the letters he wrote to his churches when problems had arisen that he wanted to address. There are seven letters in the New Testament that indisputably come from his hand; six others claim him as an author, but there are reasons to doubt these claims. According to the book of Acts, Paul was eventually arrested for socially disruptive behavior and sent to Rome to face trial. An early tradition outside of the New Testament indicates that Paul was martyred there, in Rome, during the reign of the emperor Nero, in A.D. 64.

**Philotheus Bryennios:** Philotheus Bryennios (1833–1914) was a Greek scholar important in the annals of history for discovering the Didache in 1873, in the library of the Jerusalem Monastery of the Holy Sepulchre in Constantinople. He was born in Constantinople but was educated in Germany. The manuscript he discovered contained not only the Didache (which before this was unknown) but also the Letter of Barnabas, 1 and 2 Clement, and the epistles of Ignatius. It appears to have been produced in A.D. 1056. Many scholars hail this discovery as one of the greatest of the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Pliny the Younger:** Pliny the Younger (A.D. 62–113) is so named to differentiate him from his uncle, Pliny the Elder, a famous natural scientist and author who perished in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. As a young Roman aristocrat, Pliny the Younger received a top-rate literary education and is known from his literary remains, chiefly letters that he sent to the then-emperor Trajan from his post in the Asia Minor province of Bythinia, where he was appointed in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century to serve as governor.

Among the valuable information to be gleaned from these letters is an account of Pliny's proceedings against Christians, whom he treated as criminals deserving of death. When Christians were brought before him, he ordered them to perform a sacrifice to the image of the emperor; if they refused, he had them executed. Any Christians, however, who recanted their faith and made the sacrifice were released. This legal proceeding against the Christians was

sanctioned by Trajan himself and may represent the typical judicial actions against Christians in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century throughout the empire.

**Polycarp of Smyrna:** Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna, in Asia Minor, for most of the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Born around A.D.70, he was martyred as a Christian in 156; the account of his arrest, trial, and execution (by being burned at the stake) is preserved for us in a firsthand report written in a letter by fellow Christians in Smyrna. This is the first detailed account of a martyrdom to survive from ancient Christianity outside the New Testament.

Some 45 years before his death, Polycarp had received a letter from Ignatius of Antioch, which still survives; Ignatius indicates that he had stayed in Smyrna en route to his own martyrdom in Rome and had come to know and respect the bishop there. In addition, we have a letter (or more likely, two letters, later spliced together) written by Polycarp himself to the Christians of Philippi, addressing ethical and theological issues that had arisen in their church.

Although not an original thinker, Polycarp was, thus, one of the most well known and important proto-orthodox leaders of the early and mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century. Later legend indicates that he had once been a companion of the apostle John and later became the teacher of Irenaeus; the latter claim may be right, but there appears to be little credible evidence for the former.

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